

## Pastoral Transition Team Report

Sunday, March 17, 2024

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### Summary of House Meeting Data

Executive Summary of House Meetings:

Through 14 house meetings, 90 people were engaged in conversations about MCCGSL and the future. Each House Meeting used a script to ensure the same general questions were asked at each gathering. Below is a summary of the questions and overall responses.

1. **What word, phrase or sentence in our mission or vision statements gets you most excited? What appeals to you about the sentence you chose?**
  - a. "Come as you are, believing as you do," "Everyone belongs" and "Explore relationship with God on your own terms" resonate most across house meetings.
  - b. We are a community of people who want to practice faith on a wide spectrum of beliefs where all kinds of people can feel welcome. This requires us to embrace discomfort as we make room for experiences and understandings different than our own.
2. **What does it mean that MCCGSL can be the "hub" for the LGBTQIA+ community? How are we living into that? Where can we grow?**
  - a. There is a question if a "hub" for the LGBTQIA community is needed in the changing landscape where it is increasingly easier to be out. Some resonance that we might be a "spiritual hub."
  - b. There as lots of energy around the idea that a way of being a "hub" might be in the ways that we interact with other LGBTQIA and allied communities by supporting other initiatives already happening so we can live out our faith and increase awareness that we are here when people need support or are interested in a faith community.
  - c. Need to participate more in social justice and support LGBTQIA community in a wider way.



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3. **Who isn't present in our community who you'd like to see more of?**
  - a. Young professionals, teens, children, young families, more people of color, trans folks.
  - b. Focus on the "TIA" part of the LGBTQIA community
  - c. More racial diversity
  - d. Create more space for those with physical disabilities
4. **When you think about our church today, what concerns you?**
  - a. Do we need to continue to be the "gay church" or should we shift directions into being a "progressive church?"
  - b. How do we keep the community together with so much diversity (theological, geographic, economic, age etc.) while also reaching out to new demographics (college-students, trans youth, people of color underrepresented in our community etc.)
  - c. Is our church shrinking?
  - d. Aging congregation.
  - e. How can we recruit more volunteers?
  - f. What happens if CUCC closes or sells the building?
  - g. Is our building the best for us? Should we have our own space? Concerns about finances. Worries also about safety.
  - h. Is the MCC denomination viable?
5. **Based on your ideas for the future and concerns from our last discussion, what kind of leaders (pastors and otherwise) are you hoping for?**
  - a. We are currently understaffed and need to invest in more staff to build our future.
  - b. Need a balance of teachings that bridge the distance between "religious" and "spiritual."
  - c. Staff needs to be well-trained with strong skills in empowering leaders, communication, preaching, community engagement, leadership, administration, social media, conflict management, able to challenge, and also a heart for God, down to earth, engaging, open, empathic, joyful.
  - d. Committed to diversity and inclusion with a passion for social justice.
  - e. An innovative leader who can engage the community and create inter-generational connection.
  - f. Someone who doesn't have too many outside commitments they aren't attentive to the inner needs of the congregation.
  - g. Someone who has a strong Bible background.
  - h. Overall, lots of ideas on staffing including keeping the same model (senior/associate) or innovating to consider group leadership with many staff who share responsibilities; many staff who specialize in one thing; one ordained person and a mix of lay folk; having one person who is hired to be an outreach/social justice coordinator; having a counselor on staff.



## Summary of Survey Data

During the first few weeks of this year (2024), Metropolitan Community Church of Greater St. Louis (MCCGSL) conducted a listening process to determine future areas of church focus and the qualities of a pastor necessary to fulfill these hopes and dreams. The Pastoral Transition Team, a group of individuals made up of board members and congregants, asked all members and attendees to complete a survey so that we could collectively discern a bright future and possibilities for MCCGSL.

The survey asked what we do well today and about the congregant’s hopes and dreams for the ways MCCGSL can live into our mission and vision in the future. We also wanted to know how congregants envisioned ministries, outreach, volunteer engagement, and church leadership in the future.

The survey was structured in five sections (Mission and Vision, Volunteer engagement, Pastoral preference, Ministry, MCC administration, and Demographics). The survey was made available to church members and nonmembers from January to February 2024.

**Sixty-one** individuals participated in the survey. 82% were members and 10% were non-members who regularly attend.

### DEMOGRAPHIC STATISTICS:

13% 40-49

7% 20-39

#### Attendance:

- 26% attended 10-19 years,
- 23% attended over 20 years,
- 18% attended 5-9 years,
- 16% attended 2-4 years
- 12% attended less than two years,

*(Note that 81% of survey respondents were over the age of 50)*

#### Gender identity:

- 64% female
- 30% male
- 5% transgender

#### Race:

- 89% White/Caucasian,
- 7% Black/African American, and
- 5% mixed races and lineages

#### Attraction:

- 56% gay or lesbian
- 18% heterosexual
- 12% bisexual
- 5% pansexual

#### Why was MCCGSL originally chosen as church home:

- 61% inclusive message
- 49% sexuality was affirmed
- 48% pastor(s)
- 43% worship style
- 41% music program

#### Ages:

- 43% 60-69
- 25% 70-79
- 13% 50-59



## Executive Summary of Survey Results

### *Mission and Vision*

The mission of MCCGSL is *“We are a community of LGBTQIA+ folx and allies embodying the liberating heart of Jesus where everyone is invited to come as you are, believing as you do.”*

Regarding how well MCCGSL is living into our mission statement:

51% very well

38% well

8% in the middle of not doing well and doing very well.

*The vision of MCCGSL is “Everyone Belongs. With remarkable warmth and bold, progressive worship, we are cultivating a joyful, supportive congregation where you can explore your relationship with God on your own terms. We strive to be a hub for the entire LGBTQIA+ community, creating a liberating movement within and beyond our church walls. Together, we commit to racial and social justice while embodying an optimistic hope for the future. We invite you to bring your full self to unite your spirituality, sexuality, gender identity, and heart for justice. Come, join us!”*

- 36% **“Come, join us!”** makes them the most excited
- 23% **With remarkable warmth and bold progressive worship...**
- 18% **“Together, we commit to racial and social justice...”**.

Reasons for choosing the phrases they did included, but were not limited to:

- All people are welcome here.
- .... we must continue to bring the HOPE and the CHANGE in our world.... representing ALL GOD'S CHILDREN.
- Everyone is welcome to learn of God's love regardless of their previous church background.

30% or more of congregants felt we do all the vision well; however, the top three sentences we do best are:

1) 61% chose *“With remarkable warmth and bold, progressive worship, we are cultivating a joyful, supportive congregation where you can explore your relationship with God on your own terms”*.

2) 61% also chose *“We invite you to bring your full self to unite your spirituality, sexuality, gender identity, and heart for justice”*.

3) 56% chose *“Everyone Belongs.”*

51% believed we need to work on being a hub for the entire LGBTQIA+ community

48% commit to racial and social justice

Areas where the response indicated we haven't done enough:

- 56% for racial and social justice



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- 54% for anti-oppression training
- 54% for congregational care.

### *Volunteer Engagement*

75% currently volunteer with the church and nearly 40% of those active volunteers assist either 1-2 hours a week or 3-4 hours a week.

The top three volunteer activities are:

- 57% communion and worship
- 54% social events
- 48% fundraising events

61% volunteerism is visible well or very well.

Unable to volunteer, 61% said it was due to their work schedule or personal schedule.

### *Pastoral Preference*

59% had no preference for the number of years of experience the new spiritual leader would have.

Concerning what spiritual leadership will emphasize in their future messages:

- 90% spiritual development
- 82% practical guidance for daily living
- 77% social justice
- 71% biblical and theological teaching.

The following describes the highest qualities congregants are looking for in a pastor:

- 67% Skilled as a: preacher
- 56% Teacher
- 54% Counselor
- 49% Prioritizes: community and social needs
- 43% Preaching
- 38% Visionary leadership

Anecdotally, respondents used words such as friendly, extroverted, outgoing, and warm.

### *Ministry*

44 % believed we do best is host moving worship services

Areas that need to be strengthened:

23% reaching out to those in the community who need us most

15% classes focused on spiritual development

NEW OPTIONS FOR WORSHIP ministry:

- 71% a visual arts team
- 66% greeting cards ministry
- 44% children's worship ministry



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- 44% drama and skits team

NEW OPTIONS FOR DISCIPLESHIP AND EDUCATION:

- 51% ministry: adult education event organizing
- 41% new member orientation assisting
- 41% skill building
- 38% online learning moderating
- 34% special speaking coordination

NEW OPTIONS FOR FELLOWSHIP AND COMMUNITY MINISTRY:

- 67% advocacy and supporting marginalized groups
- 54% community outreach ambassadors
- 43% after-Sunday service brunch
- 39% gender identity and safe space initiatives
- 30% transgender and support initiatives

ESSENTIAL ISSUES FOR THE NEXT 2-5 years:

- 67% LGBTQIA+ issues
- 50% ending white supremacy

IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR THE NEXT 2-5 years:

- 89% Housing/homelessness
- 79% Anti-gun violence
- 79% Environmental justice
- 79% Domestic/sexual violence
- 77% Immigration reform
- 77% Healthcare reform
- 70% Criminal justice reform

ESSENTIAL COMMUNITY FOCUS:

- 74% Essential to focus on the transgender community

### *MCC Administration*

How well our church addresses organizational tasks like decision-making, information sharing, and resource development:

Average of 50% agree we do 'ok' at these items.

Areas where we need to do better:

- 39% publicizing activities to the community
- 30% being more transparent about conflict and conflicts are handled



## Summary of Church Trends

*“Even the act of resisting change, changes us.” Brian McLaren*

During the Pastoral Transition Process, we learned about church trends through findings in the **FACTS Survey (Faith Communities Today)** as presented by Rev. Colleen Darraugh, MCC’s representative on the National Survey Team. The statistics below are from The FACTS Survey Twenty Years of Congregational Change: The 2020 Faith Communities Today which summarizes findings from the largest national survey of congregations ever conducted in the U.S. It captures a pre- and early pandemic picture of America’s faith communities and affirms many of the trends evident over the past few decades, while also highlighting some distinct areas of change. This report is published by Faith Communities Today, a multireligious and collaborative research initiative that has been tracking trends in the U.S. religious landscape since 2000. You can read the report in full here: <https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2020-survey/>

- Median Attendance in 2000 was 137 people per Sunday; in 2020, average attendance was 65 people per Sunday.
- 52% of churches saw a decline between 2015 and 2020
- Mainline Protestants with a median size of 50 say 12.5% decline
- Frequency of attendance has also declined. Most “regular attendees” now attend church on average 1.2 – 1.7 times a month.
- 70% of congregations have fewer than 100 weekly attendees
- Largest Declines:
  - Liberal Americans – 46%
  - Single – 44%
  - Under 30 - 43%
- 56% are female, 33% over 65, 23% under 18
- Mainline Protestants – 42% have at least half over the age of 65
- Since the pandemic, 49% of churches report higher online attendance than onsite

In addition to the FACTS Survey, we also looked at key findings from the EPIC Survey (Exploring the Pandemic Impact on Congregations). One stand out statistic from the EPIC survey is that 7 in 10 adults under 30 have not attended a religious service of any kind in the last month. Young adults are active in the community though, serving on volunteer teams, social justice initiatives, and creating online communities. Overall, the survey stressed the importance of being a community of dynamic change with an openness to innovation. The future of the church must include hybrid (onsite and online) ministries, hybrid programs, and online giving. [The EPIC survey can be accessed here.](#)

**Where does MCCGSL fit into this?**



Average Attendance:

2014: 204

2018: 141

2019: 121 (note: this is the year MCCGSL moved to new location in Carondelet)

2020: *Though we have data, it's inconsistent because of the pandemic*

2021: Onsite: 69; online: 62; total: 131

2022: Onsite: 73; online: 69; total: 142

2023: Onsite: 81 and online 58; total: 139

2024 (so far): 87 onsite; online 74; total: 161

Overall, MCCGSL has fared well in the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, we did not have a live-streamed service, though we did record sermons and share them online, we did not track views. Of course, that all changed in 2020 when we started live streaming. MCCGSL tracks live-streamed views through the attendance card, active participation on Facebook (i.e. active in the chat, "like" or "share"), and through data collected on Boxcast, our streaming service where average minutes watched is 20 minutes. All data collected online is compiled by 1:30 or so on Sunday, so we do not capture those who worship at alternative times.

Studying the FACTS and EPIC data with our own data has helped us to realize the only way forward is as a hybrid (onsite and online) community. To sustain and grow our community, we need to embrace a both/and attitude when it comes to community building, worship, and service.

## **Recommendations for Next Chapter of MCCGSL**

In light of a constantly changing church environment, the Pastoral Transition Team recognizes the need for nimbleness and concluded that we need to take risks, try new things, experiment, and move away from a hierarchical model.

Survey results and house meeting data revealed what we know is true: MCCGSL brings people together from across diverse experiences, traditions, and affinities, AND we need to continue to broaden that inclusive tradition. Whatever we do, we will continue to have vibrant worship and a variety of programs (both onsite and online) to meet the needs of many throughout the year. In addition, we see a strong sense of call toward the margins: toward the "nones" and "dones" ("nones" = those who identify as having no religious belief/affiliation, and "dones" those who have been hurt by religion and so are "done" with church), transgender siblings, minority and oppressed groups.

Our work identified that a growing number of those that MCCGSL can and should minister to those who will never come inside of our church building. Some will attend online; others will





connect with us only through the work we do in the community. Thus, the future of MCCGSL will need to create more space for those in the margins of our community not only through various worship services, and programming, but also by going into the community (onsite and online) to be WITH those in marginalized groups. For MCCGSL to live into our vision statement, we must be visible and active WITH other groups, accompany marginalized individuals and groups in their struggles, be seen as leaders and advocates for social justice, and by our participation demonstrate the heart of Jesus in action.

The Pastoral Transition Team believes that accomplishment of this vision will be best met by a team approach, with a strong Lead Pastor focused on nurturing the spiritual growth of MCCGSL participants and building loving community within and outside the church walls. We believe that the Lead Pastor must be supported by a strong team of staff and volunteers, who will collaborate to support community care and outreach, and be responsible for the business, technical and other administrative functions necessary to operate the church lovingly, efficiently and effectively.

## **Nomination of Rev. Lauren Bennett to be Lead Pastor**

The Board unanimously voted to recommend Rev. Lauren to be our next Lead Pastor. It was decided to move away from “Senior Pastor” to “Lead Pastor” and to enter into a covenant agreement with Rev. Lauren. Although most duties are the same, we want to invite Rev. Lauren into a spirit of collaboration with all things in the church from worship to justice. Collaboration means that we pledged to support her with a team of staff and volunteers to accomplish our vision and mission together.

Rev. Lauren has a very impressive formal background that has uniquely prepared her for this role. She has a Master of Divinity, has completed a year of coursework for Doctor of Ministry in Social Transformation (which she paused when becoming the Provisional Senior Pastor), and completed Clinical Pastoral Education while working as part of the San Francisco Night Ministry. She has been on staff for the worldwide MCC Denomination for nearly ten years. As the denomination’s Conference and Meeting Coordinator, she has co-directed international General Conferences, and been a collaborator for events such as People of African Descent Conference, Women’s Conference, denominational Clergy Retreats and numerous local church retreats for staff and clergy. Rev. Lauren has also worked as a community organizer, directly engaging 15 congregations of all faith traditions in justice ministry. Her experience as a community organizer included work with local and state officials to implement projects and influence public policy, helping to launch an in-jail rehabilitation program and procuring \$15 million for affordable



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housing. Rev. Lauren has served as adjunct faculty at Eden Theological Seminary. She actively pursues her personal and spiritual growth, including engaging with a spiritual director, and participating in Bethany Fellows (a mentoring and spiritual leadership ministry for young clergy). Feedback from all those who have worked with Rev. Lauren in any of these roles enthusiastically endorses her as effective, professional, a remarkable organizer, and a delight to work with - for her managers, colleagues, peers and participants in programs or ministries.

Overall, we endorse Rev. Lauren for the role of Lead Pastor because of her well documented skills and training, and even more because she has a heart for love, seeks justice for all, and challenges us when she speaks. During her time with MCCGSL, she has already developed strong connections to others in the broader community, starting to open doors for MCCGSL to be seen as the community light and leader that our congregation says we want to be. Rev. Lauren has a pastor's heart. She is deeply spiritual and truly loves people. Many of us have experienced the loving way that she is truly with us as we live through life's challenges and joys. We believe that Rev. Lauren's loving, spiritual manner, leadership skills, community organizing skills, and ability to connect with all types of people and groups make her the right person to accompany MCCGSL on the next part of our journey as our Lead Pastor.

**Faithfully Submitted,  
Pastoral Transition Team**

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