

**REPORT TO THE EXECUTIVE BOARD  
BY THE COMMUNICATION TASK FORCE  
FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH,  
CHESHIRE**

**November 7, 2006**

**MEMBERS OF THE FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
COMMUNICATION TASK FORCE**

Robert Mead, chair

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## BACKGROUND

The Communication Task Force was created by the Executive Board in May 2006 to conduct a needs assessment and make recommendations for communication strategies that inform, equip, and unite the friends and members of the First Congregational Church community.

Among our major goals were to:

- Make a communication audit of all current methods of communication, such as paper, oral, web site, bulletin boards, and telephone, and make recommendations for improvement and expansion as necessary.
- Perform an audit of current messages, and provide recommendations for prioritizing and sending messages through appropriate channels.
- Conduct a congregational audit on the preferred channels for receiving and sending information about the church and make recommendations for changes.

First Congregational Church has both internal and external communication needs. This study concentrated on internal communication. We recommend that at another time, a group be established to study external communication issues such as signage, the preparation and use of press releases, and the creation of a First Congregational Church logo.

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Beginning in mid-May, the Task Force met approximately monthly at the church. We began with a “self-audit”: Members expressed their own views about what works and doesn’t work with communication at the church.

We then conducted two focus groups with approximately 12 people each. Among other questions, participants were asked how they personally receive news of what’s going on at the church; what their preferred methods of communication currently are; and what they would like to see improved. Those invited to participate included new and longtime members; men and women; older and younger people; those who attend every week and those who attend infrequently; those “plugged in” to boards and committees and those who are not yet so involved – in other words, a good cross-section of the congregation. We also held an “all-church focus group” in October.

The Task Force met once with Clergy and Staff at a regular weekly meeting, to receive their input, and twice with the Executive Board. And we also worked with the church's volunteer web master, Carolyn Brown, to gain a greater understanding of how the church's web site works. We are grateful for all those who gave their time to meet with us. Their input was invaluable.

## **FOREWORDS**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Communication at the First Congregational Church is in many ways adequate, but there is room for much improvement. Some of these improvements will take time, may involve expenditures, and certainly will need a new commitment from clergy, staff, lay leaders, and the congregation in general. Establishing a "communication coordinator" for the church would be a good step.



### **THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS**

Our church is blessed with many talented and hard-working individuals who quite literally put in countless hours, entirely on a volunteer basis, to do God's work here. As the Task Force met with members and friends of the church, we were struck again and again by the energy and dedication of those who work on various communication initiatives, serve on boards and committees, and in many other ways contribute to the life of the church. Volunteers are vital to maintaining the fabric of our life together. Likewise, we were reminded anew that the clergy and the professional staff always "go the extra mile" – and sometimes many miles beyond that. We quite literally could not exist as a church without those who, whether paid or unpaid, have serving Christ as their first priority, and we give God thanks for them.

Because this report analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of communication at the First Congregational Church, it may in part appear to be critical of aspects of some current channels of communication. This analysis in no way is meant to reflect unfavorably on the hard work of clergy, staff, members, or friends of the church. Rather, it is an attempt to create a communication system here that, in the words of 1 Corinthians 12:31, represents "a still more excellent way."

## ANALYSIS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### PEOPLE

Any study of communication at our church must begin with people – those who do the communicating, both giving and receiving.

In our own way, we of the First Congregational Church are diverse. We come from different faith backgrounds, are of different ages and economic circumstances, have a variety of needs and expectations, and have different levels of commitment to the church. Some people are very active in the church, understand how it works, and participate actively. Others are connected with the church only on those rare occasions when they attend a service. Yet others are somewhere in between. Understanding and accommodating these differences is an important part of improving communication.

We are a large and vibrant church. In some ways, however, our size is an impediment to effective communication. For example, those who attend at 9 o'clock and those who attend at 11 o'clock do not always constitute a single body of worshippers. In improving communication, we must not lose sight of the fact that our size is an issue.

### HISTORY, POLITY AND MISSION

About 50 percent of new members in our church come from a non-Congregational background, particularly Roman Catholic; they are not necessarily familiar with the way a Congregational church operates. For example, they don't always know whom to ask about an issue or how to make a suggestion for improving our life together, in part because they do not come from churches that encourage questions and suggestions. In welcoming these new members, we need to **communicate our polity** much more clearly – certainly during new member orientation, but probably in other ways, too, perhaps through a brochure, or from time to time from the pulpit. This communication must be ongoing.

- We need a new mission statement. The church's present mission statement, "We are Christ's disciples, living God's word, together," is more a slogan than a true mission statement, and does not adequately convey information about how we operate as a church or what we believe our mission to be.

The present mission statement does not resonate with all members and friends of the church. Perhaps a good starting point for an examination of how the mission of the church is communicated would be the statement of "Purpose" as it appears in the church's by-laws (Revision of 2004) under Section A of Article II: "The purpose of this church shall be to worship God; to preach and teach children, youth, and adults the good news of Jesus Christ; to celebrate the sacraments; to encourage individual growth in Christian fellowship; to continue the church's rich heritage in this community; to render loving service toward all people; and to strive for righteousness, justice, and peace."

- Although this is not a hard and fast rule, many successful mission statements include the word "mission." We suggest that our church's mission statement begin, "It is the mission of the First Congregational Church, Cheshire, to..."
- Informing members about our polity cannot be a one-time event. Rather, it must be a part of the duties and responsibilities of clergy, staff and lay leaders to explain to others how we function, and why. This will require training and reinforcement. In addition, we should consider putting together a handbook for new members (and others) outlining how we operate.

## **AGE AND COMMUNICATION**

People of **different ages communicate in different ways**, and we need to acknowledge this in our systems of communication.

- Generally speaking, though there are many exceptions, younger (30-35 years old and under) people prefer electronic communication, while people older than that may be more comfortable with paper or the spoken word. As all of us age, we anticipate that more and more people in the general congregation will both prefer electronic communication, know how to work with it, and expect it as the norm.

## **LIMITS**

The **constraints** of our friends and members differ, too.

- Some people have the time to read and hear lots about what's going on in the church, while others don't.
- There are also communication differences based upon limitations such as poor eyesight or hearing, or physical mobility issues.

## DIFFERENT COMMITMENTS

People are “**plugged in**” to our church at different levels.

- Some are very aware of most everything that’s going on.
- Others attend regularly, but for one reason or another are not connected to the main lines of communication (such as boards and committees).
- Still others are on our rolls, and may or may not contribute financially, but are marginally connected to the church at best. All of these groups have different communication needs.

*Recommendations: We need to take advantage of every communication tool available to us. No single way to communicate will be adequate to meet everyone’s needs. Redundancy is not a problem; in fact, in some cases the more a message is conveyed, in various ways, the better. While not lessening the use of so-called ‘traditional’ communication systems, we should greatly increase the use of electronic communication, as that is the way of the future. We need to increase our friends’ and members’ understanding of “the Congregational Way” – that is, how we differ from other Christian denominations. Communicating our polity must be done regularly and clearly.*



## THE WAYS WE COMMUNICATE

### ORAL

Personal oral communication is **appreciated by many**.

- Home visits by Deacons, the Every-Member Campaign of 2005, the Calling Ministry, the recent Cottage Meetings, announcements made during worship services, and news conveyed at church meetings are all effective communication tools. The problem is that in general, the more personal the communication, the less efficiently it is delivered. Announcements made during services on Sunday, for example, reach the members and friends who are in church that day, not the majority who are elsewhere. And they take up valuable, and limited, time.
- Much information is conveyed by and to church leadership (clergy, staff, and lay) at the monthly Executive Board meetings. But all too often, the information doesn't make it past this "top layer" to the average person in the pew. There's not always much attempt to disseminate the information shared at other board and committee meetings, although meeting minutes are provided to the church office.
- In-church announcements have the benefit of being clearly communicated to a captive audience, but they have their drawbacks. For one, they reach only those who are actually at a worship service (and those who later watch the service on cable TV). For another, they eat into service time and may detract from the central purpose of Sunday worship.
- Information about church matters is often discussed and shared at the fellowship coffee hours after worship, but there is usually an insufficient attempt to disseminate it. Such informal discussions are fine for those who are there, but of not much use to the wider church.

*Recommendations: Continue, and consider expanding, some types of oral communication, but don't rely on it overly. Make a greater effort to share non-confidential information discussed by church leaders at meetings.*

## ELECTRONIC I: WEB SITE

The church web site and associated computer-oriented media (e-mail, blogs, chat rooms, etc.) have a **high potential for communicating** effectively, although at the moment some of these (e.g., chat rooms) are generally not used at First Congregational Church. The web is also an excellent place to archive lots of material that might be of use to the congregation.

- In order for electronic communication to approach its potential, it must be a lot more up-to-date, thorough, and speedy than it is now. As things stand, there is little reason for our friends and members to visit the web site, because they can't find the information they need there.
- The web site is also underutilized by communicators. Web Master Carolyn Brown, who volunteers her time, states that when she took on the job, she was expecting more input from staff, boards, committees, and others, than she now receives.
- The site must be updated frequently. To assume that a volunteer will always be available for this task places the process at risk. A small team of web experts should be assembled, to assist the web master, to cover during any temporary absences, and to form a cadre that will insure continuity.
- All boards, committees, clergy, and staff must forward articles, messages, schedules, special events, etc to the web master on a regular basis. Frequently used forms such as pledge cards and prayer request forms should be available on the web site. This can start now.
- The church web site is the perfect place to archive all past issues of the *Parish Post*, annual reports, sermons, and other documents. As many of these as possible should be retained on the site for as long as possible – years, at least. We recommend that these be archived in the .pdf (Adobe Acrobat Reader) format, not as Word documents as many are now.
- The web site could also use a graphics update. Some of the images are too small or too dark; we recommend using fewer large, bright pictures as opposed to many small, dark ones. Next year, we will also need to update the site to remove photos and other information about Rick Dacey and others who will no longer be in Cheshire; this might be an appropriate time for a visual overhaul.
- Presently, the web site does not “open up” to fill the screens of most computers. This is due to the fact that computers have various resolution levels, and our site is pegged to fill the screens of those computers set at a low resolution level.

- On the plus side, we believe the web site presently does a good job informing those outside the church – potential members, for example – about us. It clearly tells where we are, who we are, when services are held, where to park, and so forth.
- We should consider placing a web-connected computer in a common area for members and friends of the church, particularly those without computers at home.

*Recommendations: Make expanding and maintaining the web site a priority. Create a web team to assist the web master on an ongoing basis. Greatly increase the effort to get as many e-mail addresses as possible from members. Establish and publicize a system by which boards and committees may get news of importance on the web site. Notify all boards, committees, lay leaders, clergy, and staff that the web site is an effective tool and should be used. Anything that is currently being written for public dissemination should be considered for inclusion and archiving in the appropriate section of the web site. Select key forms for inclusion in the web site. Freshen the look of the site with fewer, larger, brighter photos. Change the resolution level so that it fills the screens of more computers (e.g., 1280 by 1024 pixels).*

## **ELECTRONIC II: E-MAIL**

E-mail has good potential as a communication tool, especially going forward, as so many younger people use this as the preferred means of keeping in touch. Some people, for example, get the *Parish Post* and other publications via e-mail rather than postal mail. However, there are some stumbling blocks:

- Not everyone uses e-mail, although the numbers of non-users is constantly diminishing.
- E-mail addresses change more frequently than postal addresses or telephone numbers. Regular updating is required to maintain a list that is substantially accurate.
- Some members and friends are unwilling to give the church their e-mail addresses, lest they receive spam. This concern can be addressed by first, assuring people that we will neither send spam nor share their e-mail addresses with others, and second, by sticking to those promises.

*Recommendation: Expand the use of e-mail. Continue to canvass members and friends for their e-mail addresses. Assure people that the church will not send spam or share their e-mail addresses with others, and act on that promise.*

### ELECTRONIC III: TELEPHONE ANSWERING MACHINE

The church's telephone answering machine is **adequate for handling most incoming calls** of a routine nature, because it provides information about worship times and the church's location.

- However, it is not adequately used as a tool for communicating last-minute changes such as weather-related delays or cancellations. Care must be taken to insert updated messages immediately when we anticipate that people will be calling the church to find out about possible delays or cancellations.

*Recommendation: When inclement weather threatens a worship service or other event, make sure to update the answering machine.*

### PUBLICATIONS

The *Parish Post* and the weekly Bulletin both do their jobs well, but there is **room for improvement**.

- The *Parish Post* is well read by many people, but it has always been a "cut and paste" effort without a consistent look, style, or message. (It is thus typical of many, if not most, church newsletters.) It is also reactive, meaning that it receives news items that are handed in. It is not proactive – no one is actively seeking news and information from the staff, boards and committees, or individuals.
- The once-a-month printing schedule of the *Post* means that a lot of the time, its news is somewhat stale; we ought to consider more frequent publication, perhaps biweekly.
- The *Parish Post* need not be the place for long documents, reports, and so forth. Long documents can be posted on the web site, with a reference such as "for more details, see the church web site" in the *Parish Post*.
- The inclusion of a weekly calendar in the Bulletin is a great help. We ought to consider expanding that to make it a real weekly newsletter, with items of interest (beyond calendar listings) to the congregation.
- Some drawbacks to the Bulletin are: Its primary purpose is to be a guide to the worship service; communicating other information is secondary. And of course, it reaches only those who actually show up for worship services.

*Recommendations: Consider more frequent publication of the Parish Post, and/or expanding the weekly Bulletin calendar insert to make it a newsletter. Longer-term, create the role of “communication coordinator” as a role for one of the Executive Board’s members-at-large. This person would serve as “editor-in-chief” of all publications, or would oversee a small team of volunteers, including someone who fulfills that role. The editor would be supported by “reporters” who would meet with boards, committees, clergy and staff and solicit news articles proactively. Their reports would be included in the Parish Post, web site, and other selected forms of communication, as deemed appropriate by the editor and his/her team. The Parish Post should also be archived on line, as should weekly Bulletins, if feasible.*

## **MASS MAILINGS**

Mass mailings from the church can be an **effective way of reaching the entire church membership**, but they have their drawbacks.

- They are expensive to mail.
- And friends and members of First Congregational Church probably see such mailings as either the bearer of bad news or as requests for money – as, in both cases, they have been.

*Recommendation: Use mass mailings, but sparingly, and not only for bad news or requests for money.*

## **BULLETIN BOARDS**

With some exceptions, these are, in a word, **wallpaper**, and generally ineffective as a communication tool. Attractive when first mounted, they often become stale.

- One exception occurs when they are used to post sign-up sheets or large posters of upcoming events such as the Strawberry Festival. People find this useful, probably because such uses are limited in time.
- Needless to say, another drawback is that information on bulletin boards doesn’t reach those who are not physically in church.

*Recommendation: Unless the church is willing to make a great effort to turn the various bulletin boards into truly effective communication media, they ought to be used for information that is nice, but hardly essential, to know – such as photos of youth mission trips, news clippings about members, and so forth. Try to refresh them more often. On occasion, they can be effectively used for sign-up sheets and the like.*

## OTHER ISSUES

### IMPORTANCE OF FOLLOW-UP

A **lack of follow-up sometimes hinders communication** at the church.

- For example, in the fall of 2005 there was a campaign spearheaded by Stewardship in which volunteers visited other members to talk about what they liked and didn't like about First Congregational, which issues were important to them, and so forth. People said they enjoyed and appreciated these in-person interviews, but there was little or no communication afterward. Some people wondered, "what happened?" They wanted some sort of follow-up report, but none was made.
- There was a more positive response to the recent "challenge" gift to the church. When the monetary challenge was met, that was communicated well.

One of the functions of the Executive Board, according to the Bylaws, is to "provide ... coordination among church staff, boards, committees, and organizations." It seems to us that such coordination must involve communicating, especially the sharing of information. While those who attend Executive Board meetings often are made aware of what's going on in many parts of the church, this information seldom is passed on to others once the meeting ends.

*Recommendations: When a major campaign, initiative, or similar action takes place, make sure there is a specific plan and timetable for adequate follow-up, and that it is communicated to the congregation effectively. Within the Executive Board, give someone the responsibility of communicating information about the church to boards, committees, and the congregation in general.*

### INFORMATION CENTER

The Task Force agrees with the recommendation made late last year to **create an Information Center**, a physical place in the church for brochures and publications such as the Parish Post, Sunday bulletins, "welcome" brochures, information about Christian education, sign-up forms, and the like.

- It should be staffed by people rather than merely being a location to file handouts, brochures and other literature – although in off-hours, these would be available there.

- The people at the Information Center would not only provide printed material, but also answer questions and explain church programs and opportunities. This will therefore require training.

*Recommendation: Create a staffed Information Center, and train members in how to operate it.*

## **A CULTURE OF COMMUNICATION**

Clergy, staff, and lay leaders need to work to **foster a culture of communication** at First Congregational church. At every level, we must say to ourselves, “how can this best be communicated to our members and friends?” Some specific steps might include:

- Having every board and committee name a member to be responsible for that group's communication, disseminating information to all pertinent audiences, gathering feedback, and ensuring responsiveness.
- Incorporating communication training into leadership retreats.
- Enlisting “veteran” members to team train existing members on how our church works.
- Making polity and communication training a part of the new member process.

*Recommendation: Do what we can to make communication a priority at every level in the church.*

