

External Listening Report for Hope Lutheran, Nanaimo, BC

We want to commend the Hope Guiding Team on the large amount of work, time and effort they committed to completing a significant number of congregational, neighbourhood and community leader interviews. This report focuses on the information we have received from you through the interview process.

Congregational Listening interviews

Listening interviews were conducted with 22 members of the congregation of Hope Lutheran, Nanaimo. Of these, over half were with individuals who were 61 years of age or older. The majority of those interviewed were women. Some were long-time members, while others had more recently joined the congregation.

Many members talk about feeling most alive, engaged, and motivated when they are involved in and contributing to the life of the congregation. This includes volunteering in areas like office support or, together with others, choosing the hymns and writing the prayers for Sunday worship. Some also mentioned how important Men's Group is to them and, specifically, how important these relationships, built on trust, are to them in their day-to-day lives. Listening to others in the men's group affirms their own struggles and joys in life.

Members feel engaged and energized when working with others on projects or participating with groups outside the church on social justice or other issues... *'The community is at its best when engaged in a project to meet the needs of others e.g. supporting the Syrian Refugee family, quilting, Loaves and Fishes and CLWR.'* The congregation responds positively when a need or project is identified and groups come together well when working toward a common goal. One person enjoyed the chance to share work skills and ideas with like-minded people in the church. The Hope community does a good job of recognizing and supporting that kind of interchange.

People mention that Hope Lutheran is a welcoming church and give many examples of how that welcoming spirit was the reason they chose to make Hope their church home. One member feels embraced and encouraged, another feels accepted as s/he is, and another was accepted and engaged from the start. This is a group of people who value inclusiveness and who recognize the importance of feeling accepted *as they are*. For example, through the Pastor's invitation, all are welcome at the Communion Table. Being accepted and included and sharing fellowship are valued by many of the members.

Hope has many life-giving characteristics. Some mentioned that there is an openness to talking about a variety of beliefs and exploring new ideas e.g. inviting the refugee family to quilting to help understand their life and faith while at the same time helping them with new language skills.

The congregation feels spiritually fed and responds well when needs are expressed. Hope is an active congregation that is relationship-rich. They value their life in Christ together. One member summed it up by saying *'God rests comfortably in this place.'* Caring for others,

both in the congregation and in the larger community, is important. The people have great respect for their pastor and appreciate how his sermons connect with their lives.

Supporting one another through difficult times in their lives is also mentioned as times when they felt engaged and connected. Baptisms and funerals are examples of times of feeling especially connected to one another. A member said, *'It isn't about the rituals, it's about human connections.'*

For some of those interviewed, God is most real and alive when they are engaged during the worship. The Good Friday service was mentioned several times as being a time when they recognize their need for Christ and their thankfulness to God for the gift of Jesus. Easter was also mentioned as a time of celebration and light. A number of members expressed the importance of a variety of music and liturgy options as well as the practical support offered in the Sunday morning sermons. The sermons contribute to a sense of meaningful worship.

The musical gifts in the congregation greatly enhance the worship life of the community. In general the diversity of music has been a strength, many references were made to the men's chorus and the adaptation of Halleluia (Lord's prayer) as a sign of the congregation's musical innovation.

The congregation is insightful and thoughtful and has grown in their faith even through difficult times. The sense of inclusivity is experienced as all are welcomed to the table.

Church is the foundation for many of the members of Hope. It is the place where they feel welcomed, accepted, encouraged and strengthened to live out their call to love and care for others, both inside and outside the church building, a place where they value real and genuine interpersonal connections. This is evident in their fellowship and social events.

Those interviewed have a number of wishes for the congregation. One hope shared by many is to see an increase in the number of children, youth, young adults and young families in the congregation. A desire to see the congregation grow in social awareness and do more outreach into the community is also identified as a hope for the future. The wish includes a desire for Hope to continue to nurture outside relationships with other helping organizations like AA and NA. There is also a hope that the congregation become more of a community hub (as above) with outside user groups. Included in that is a desire to partner with others, both inside the larger church, and in the community, for music and event planning. There is also the wish that the congregation continue to strive for diversity and inclusion. Some members also expressed a need for more visiting, especially to the seniors in the congregation. Another new idea mentioned for future consideration is to explore opportunities for varied worship practices.

The community of Hope expressed a desire to continue to thrive and to engage with the community, including the wider church, ecumenical partners, and community outreach.

Neighbourhood Interviews

There were 7 neighbourhood interviews conducted with people who had lived in their neighbourhoods from 4 years to 70 years. Some lived in Nanaimo and others in the surrounding communities. Over the years some of the neighbourhoods have had a

demographic shift. They have moved from housing primarily young families to a more mixed demographic, including retirees.

When asked to describe what they appreciate most about their neighbourhood words most frequently used included quiet, safety, and good neighbours. Some of the interviews expressed concern that neighbourhoods are changing, demographically and economically for example some of those interviewed felt that this had contributed to a greater incidence of crime. Being able to walk to amenities, including school and shopping, was something that was favourably mentioned numerous times. There was appreciation for where the communities are located and for all the natural beauty surrounding them.

There were a number of things that were identified as challenges in the neighbourhoods as well. Some of these have been brought about by the growth in Nanaimo and surrounding communities. This has led to the ongoing challenge of trying to keep abreast of this growth with the need to expand the related services, amenities and infrastructure in the city. For example, there has been an increase in the volume and speed of traffic which brings a concern for safety. Land has become more expensive and the increased cost of living is beginning to be a hardship for some. People are more transient and some newcomers have different values. Other concerns are an increase in homelessness, opportunistic property theft, and increased drug use.

Some of those interviewed expressed a concern that in their neighbourhoods issues are not being dealt with in a constructive manner and therefore may have negative results as opposed to dealing with issues through open and honest dialogue....*'to resolve issues through open and honest hearts.'*

With the growth in the city there is also a feeling that it is harder to get to know one's neighbours. Another expressed concern about the decrease in the level of trust between and among people. For example, today's children need constant adult supervision vs. the days when kids could play outside and walk on their own.

There are a number of hopes expressed by those interviewed. Many hope for a continued sense of peace and security and wish that people would begin to talk to one another to build trust. There is a desire for a greater sense of community through neighbourhood activities and events.

Those interviewed feel God is present in their community in a variety of ways. Some see it in their neighbours; others through the kindness and understanding given when needed... *'That God loves every neighbourhood and all people, not just those who believe, but everyone here.'* They also feel closer to God through their contact with nature.

Community Leader Interviews

There were 12 community leader interviews completed covering a wide range of roles in the local community.

There was a sense from the leaders that Nanaimo has good quality of life but at a cost (high taxes) There are the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. Home prices make it very difficult for young families to purchase homes in Nanaimo and the surrounding communities. There is a lack of

rental housing which also makes it hard for young families and people in general. Although community spirit is high there are a number of challenges including poverty, mental health issues and increased drug use. Support for single parent families and all families in need are critical areas of concern.

As far as recommendations, one of the leaders said, *'Look at what others are doing and support them.'* Many of the Leaders' recommendations were around filling needs in the community e.g. lunches, food banks, youth involvement programs and affordable children's programs, to name a few. One leader expressed the need to *'fix alienation and breakdown barriers'* through events or fundraising for local projects. One leader recommended joining ongoing groups already present for specific issues. Another felt the church should be a support for community organizations by helping meet the needs of the people they serve - *'to meet the community where they are at. That the forgiveness of God is the key thing the church can bring to the community that other organizations can't - bring it to people, show it to people and live it in all that we do.'* Another leader expressed the power of one-on-one connections. He said, *'If each person in a congregation connected with one person in the community the social isolation that leads to mental illness and addictions could be replaced with personal networks of support.'*

Questions

We want to have some discussion together on the following questions that have come out of the listening we have done in our congregation and community.

One of the hopes expressed by those interviewed is to see greater involvement and an increase in children, youth and young families in our church.

1. How might we discover/explore what young people/young families are looking for in a church experience? Would this be a key priority for our congregation?
2. What do you think our church community might need to look like in the future if we responded to what we are learning? Why?

When asked about life-giving characteristics some interviewed mention that Hope is a welcoming, inclusive and friendly congregation that encourages the sharing of ideas and provides support for others during difficult times.

1. How do we as a congregation explore ways of sharing these life-giving characteristics of our church family and the love of God we experience here at Hope Lutheran with our neighbours?
2. What might it look like to listen to people in our community as a way of discerning how God might be calling us to extend non-judgemental acceptance to others in the community around us? As expressed by one leader *"If each person in a congregation connected with one person in the community the social isolation that leads to mental illness and addictions could be replaced with personal networks of support."*
3. There seems to be an expectation in the community that the congregation will best serve the community by meeting needs. What is the role of church in today's

society? How might those expectations add or take away from your ministry in the community?

Some members expressed appreciation of Hope's openness to discussing a variety of beliefs and exploring new ideas, for example, the Men's Group sponsored a guest speaker on the Muslim faith and has had many discussions about a variety of different faiths.

1. As we look around our committee beyond our doors what other experiences of faith are present around us?
2. How might we understand better the faith experiences of others?