

DISCUSSION PAPER

Learning Team of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church • McMurray, PA • March 13, 2011

The Learning Team was formed to explore ways to respond to membership growth at Our Redeemer. Since its inception in February of 2010, the Learning Team has examined Our Redeemer's statistics and trends, history and culture, and identity and aspirations, all to see where we've been and where we want to go as we grow stronger in numbers. Now the team is focused on ways to manage this growth, to realize the full potential of our larger congregation, even as the draw and pull of modern life grows stronger, too.

Over the last six years, Our Redeemer's official membership has increased, but paradoxically, our worship attendance has gradually declined. In her book *Raising the Roof*, Alice Mann suggests possible reasons why this happens to many churches our size. One is the need to improve "infrastructure for member care and involvement," that is, how a church spiritually nurtures and engages current members and assimilates new ones. The more we are blessed with new *members*, the more we must accommodate the new *numbers*. But meeting each member's needs and gathering regularly is already challenging in a diverse, mobile, active, and demanding world.

We have more members, and we're all pulled in more directions. And as our church family grows, individual members may lose their sense of belonging as it becomes harder for the pastors and lay leaders to reach everyone. When this happens, some find it easier to make less room in their lives for church, to fade into the widening background. This affects not only the work of the church but also the witnesses of individuals; when people have less church in their lives, they bring to their lives less church. Size and life, then, seem to conspire against intimacy and mutual support.

Mann feels that some decentralization of leadership and care is inherently necessary to face this challenge, a process she calls a "pastoral-to-program size transition." The answer, she says, is pulling more people into leadership roles, who can then draw even more people into active involvement in church life through more flexible, smaller-group ministries. This would lead to more widespread investment of member time, talent, and treasure – and more of us worshipping together at church.

Declining worship attendance clearly indicates existing needs, but also it may forecast a slowing or even reversal of the number of people who "come and see" what Our Redeemer is all about. But before we consider new practices and programs to better embrace our growing congregation, we must consider barriers that weaken our connections with one another. By talking to many congregants, the Learning Team has seen these issues emerge:

- The demands on modern families quickly fill up their calendars, including Sundays.
- Modern life means busy schedules for everyone, young and old alike.
- Many of our new members are transient due to economic opportunities or challenges.
- Many of our younger members have no church background or clear concept of active membership.
- Our adult education, and the space for it, is limited.
- The overlap of our Sunday School and morning worship often discourages family worship.
- Our staff size is not optimal for coordination of new ministries and ministry leaders.
- Follow-up of our new members has been inconsistent.
- Our leadership base is too small for the number of current ministries and programs.
- Like us, congregations of our size often experience a diminishing sense of family.
- Our small groups are limited in number and scope and are mainly social in nature.
- Communication methods do not fully utilize the Internet or social networking.

While Our Redeemer needs to reach out further and more intentionally to its members, to break down some of the barriers listed above, it also needs to find ways for congregants to naturally "fall into" church life. One spiritually driven Council member said it took him three years to work his way into an adult Bible study, in part because the conference room provided no inconspicuous escape should he reconsider. This is just one example of how we as a congregation must rethink some of the things we do and how we do them (only some, for much of what we do is tried and true), so that as we grow, we can continuously serve the Lord at full strength, even in this modern world.

Refueling our faith goes hand in hand with strengthening our church family. In time, we will be even better prepared to begin the next phase of the Learning Team's mission: to explore ways our new strength in numbers can further mobilize our efforts in evangelism and outreach. We feast together at church so that we may go out and feed the world, in the name of Jesus Christ: our Lord, our Savior, our Redeemer.