

***Presbytery Visitation to Grace Presbyterian Church
November 2021***

Preamble:

The Congregational Visitation by Presbytery to Grace Presbyterian Church, Calgary was conducted between November 12 and November 25, 2021 by Jeff Lackie, Mary Wescott, and Sandra Cameron Evans. While two members of the team did arrange to attend worship on November 14th, all other aspects of the visitation were accomplished through technology. In lieu of an opportunity to speak broadly to members of the congregation at large, the questions from the presbytery visitation process intended to prompt conversation between the team and the congregation at a post-worship gathering were distributed as a questionnaire through electronic means, and then gathered and read by the visitation team.

Generally speaking, we found the responses indicated a high level of engagement with the stated mission, vision and values of Grace, and the visitation team was warmly received at every opportunity. We are grateful for the patience and diligence shown by clergy, the ruling elders, finance and facilities team, and the members of the congregation who chose to engage in this process.

Responses:

In terms of engagement, we received responses from six of the 11 session elders*, eight unique responses related to facilities and finance (these included responses from committee members and specific questions referred to staff or committee members best suited to answer those questions), and 25 responses from members of the congregation at large. Each of the clergy also submitted written responses.

In our zoom conversations, we spoke to all three ministers together, and then each was interviewed separately. The session conversation included seven of the current session elders*, and we met lastly with three members of the Finance committee and the Support Services Director (SSD).

**As Grace instituted term eldership in 2017, it should be noted that they distinguish between 'Session' elders (those currently serving a term) and 'Service' elders (those ordained, and often in leadership roles, but not currently on a stated term). The team wonders if there ought to be questions included in the congregational visitation process for elders not currently serving where term service is the practice of a congregation.*

There were some questions raised about the potentially ambiguous description in the questionnaires sent to "Board/Finance Committee." A suggestion that the forms ought to be tailored to the specific model of administration used in each congregation has been noted by the convener of Clergy and Congregational Care Committee.

Observations from Session's Responses and Our Conversation:

The Zoom meeting with the Elders was a time of good sharing. There are currently 11 Session Elders with one vacancy. A Service Elder has been called in to cover the vacancy which they hope to fill in the new year. They identified the challenge of finding younger people who discern the call to be an Elder and hope that Term Service might make it more acceptable.

When asked if the term service model is working, the response was it was a bit early to tell. With Covid and the Lead Minister vacancy, they are still experimenting. Work is ongoing with the relationships between committees and Session. There is uncertainty whether 12 Elders is the right number.

The work done with Graham Standish was discussed. Most found the work with Standish helpful for understanding the challenges Grace was facing; in part it affirmed what they were doing which built confidence. There were Session and Service Elders plus committee leaders involved in the process. Standish's guidance was used by the Nominating Committee who is establishing the Search Committee for the Lead Minister. However, the delay before they were able to start the process with Standish was difficult, especially for the congregation to understand.

The Mission/Vision/Values are widely circulated, with the ministers often referring to them, and they inform the work of Session and committees. Elders have heard commitment from various people to them. The Strategic Plan was officially presented at the congregational meeting in November 2021, so it was felt too early to know how the congregation perceives or values it. There will be some time before it resonates with individual congregants. The four priorities give a context for difficult conversations and informs new people.

We were interested to learn about the Deacons: they are four volunteers who have been in place since March of 2020. They report to Pastoral Care and supplement, not replace Elders, leveraging the gifts of that minister. While the program was felt to be successful, it will be reviewed.

Relationships among the Elders seems, for the most part, to be supportive and respectful; trust has grown however communication could be improved, especially between Service and Session Elders. Communication with the Finance Committee could also be better. The relationship with the three ministers seemed positive.

Observations from Finance's Responses and Our Conversation

The Finance Committee is convened by an individual with significant business leadership experience including with respect to financial management. The Committee includes four qualified accountants: Treasurer, Session Liaison, Support Services Director (SSD), and another member. Other members have business backgrounds that provide them with appropriate knowledge of financial management and oversight.

The Finance members have a faithful sense of duty and are in full support of the 'real work' of Grace's mission, vision and values – to make it possible. However, they do recognize their lack of specific fundraising experience.

Financial Position: At the moment, the funds they have with the PCC consolidated funds portfolio are doing well. But the Committee recognizes that even though Grace has sufficient deferred contributions to support programs and activities, and YTD 2021 offerings are in line with budget, deferred contributions will require to be replenished over time. Revenues have declined over the last few years, and especially so during Covid. The building is over 115 years old and requires continuous attention with exceedingly expensive cost. The Finance Team is working towards a proactive sustainability policy.

Stewardship plan: There is no formal program to promote financial stewardship. One to two years ago, session struck an ad-hoc working group to encourage stewardship and to respond to the expected loss of giving due to Covid. A good presentation led to a letter of encouragement to consider giving and the \$200K goal was met from a single donation from one individual. The Finance Committee did a debrief with the ad hoc committee to discover learnings – the letter didn't offer a broad challenge – target wasn't set – as a result there is a feeling that the ad hoc committee didn't cover the full sense of stewardship.

Financial Records and Communication: The Finance Committee receives and reviews all financial records, both summarized and detailed, monthly. The committee reports to Session through the Session Liaison. The Treasurer also attends Session on invitation, usually for year-end results, budget, and any significant issues. Financial information is posted regularly to the web-site and financial updates provided to the congregation at Congregational Meetings. The Visitation team noted that Grace's Annual Report included informative insight on programs and ministries, but lacked any financial information.

Observations from Clergy's Responses and Our Conversation:

The ministry team at Grace has made some very significant pivots in the three years since Jake and Maren's induction. The imaginative and forward-thinking model that invited each member to exercise very specific duties - Jake as Associate Minister Engagement & Service, and Maren as Associate Minister Children and Youth - has never really been fully realized. The pandemic has further played a part in the way each team member has been required to adapt the practice of their particular ministry. With the addition of Christian (under contract as Interim Pastoral Care Leader) the team dynamic and sharing of responsibilities has also changed. It must be said that this collaboration of Ministers of Word and Sacrament has offered some imaginative, highly creative, and incredibly faithful responses to the challenges encountered during the pandemic.

Maren, Jake and Christian are working well together under the circumstances, and some consideration of a reasonable distribution of duties and responsibilities may be necessary within the current 'model of ministry' at Grace.

To ensure that worship, outreach and all the other work of the congregation was accomplished through the pandemic, duties were temporarily undertaken, shared or otherwise managed with little reference to the current 'model of ministry.' This has resulted in certain misunderstandings, frustrations, weariness and a tendency to reactive rather than proactive ministry. We are assured that support is available, and that gratitude is often expressed, but the feeling conveyed to the

team was that it has been a struggle to find the kind of deep refreshment that would be most beneficial in the long term.

Each mentioned that the vacancy in the lead minister position has affected the role of SSD. The functions and reporting practices that were to have been directed through the lead minister all had to be re-imagined ‘on the fly’ and during a pandemic. The ministry team has met with the SSD, and we understand that a review is planned as part of ordinary HR practice, but we would recommend a review of the position description (that certainly could occur prior to calling a lead minister) to ensure the SSD position and its various reporting and accountability pieces are in order.

Observations from Congregational Responses:

The tone of the congregational responses is generally positive. There have been some concerns raised around the extent of the pandemic response, and one or two voices wonder if the church (generally) and Grace particularly may be following a path that is contrary to the well-being of the congregation. The Visitation team recognizes that there is a segment of the general population that remains unconvinced of the serious nature of the health risk represented by Covid, and that congregations must take the paths that seem best to them, being always mindful of Jesus’ instruction to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. To be mindful of the most vulnerable among us might seem like an unnecessary burden to those who are able and healthy, but as those who seek to follow Jesus’ example of gracious compassion, most of the responses we received suggest that it is a burden they bear patiently.

The 25 responses covered a wide range of opinion and emotion. There is a segment of these responses that expresses anxiety (or displeasure) over the departure of the lead minister. There is a wide variety of opinions (ranging from indifference to real urgency) about the need for the lead minister position to be filled.

The wide variety of responses seems typical of a large, diverse congregation in the midst of radical change. The nostalgia for what Grace used to be is certainly present, but so is the hope for what the congregation might yet become. The tension between these very different visions did not seem (to us) to be as evident within the session, though the clergy and Finance team each alluded to it.

The Congregation needs to understand that they have three competent, qualified and experienced ministers of Word and Sacrament working within a structure that has not yet been allowed to reach its potential. Departures of other ordained clergy notwithstanding, the leadership to navigate the transition that Grace is undergoing certainly is in place.

Joys and Concerns:

The Visitation team found much to be joyful in our time at Grace. We were impressed by the Finance team who seemed to be taking a broad and faith-based approach to their responsibilities, looking ‘outside the box’. They identified the importance of stewardship, while acknowledging their expertise may not encompass it. They, the Session and all leadership seemed fully invested in the Mission, Visions and Values. The clergy team is adapting to very dynamic needs, and has been impressively creative in their approach. Congregants appreciated the on-line worship that

occurred during the start of the pandemic and, in most part, commend the new approaches to mission, while also acknowledging some discomfort with the new things. The response of Grace's leadership to the red paint on the doors has been bravely and thoughtfully handled. While not everyone is as enthusiastic for this manner of engagement with the Indigenous community, Grace has shown a willingness to put words like reconciliation into action.

There are challenges of a multi-minister model that have been exacerbated by the pandemic, following the significant departures and issues of non-clergy staff accountability as well as the overlap (or lack of) between various ministry positions.

This has been a challenging and lengthy season for churches, and Grace has risen to those challenges with creativity and faithfulness. We have been blessed by the privilege to learn more about the life and work of Grace, and pray God's blessing on their continuing witness in the Beltline.

Recommendations:

1. That the ministers, elders and volunteers of Grace Presbyterian Church be commended for their diligent and imaginative responses to the work that has presented itself over the last 20 months.
2. That the leadership be commended for their articulation and pursuit of the stated mission, vision and values of Grace, and that they continue to be diligent in their communication of that mission, vision and values to the congregation.
3. That the Finance team and session of Grace collaborate on the clear communication of the congregation's financial position (especially in an annual report).
4. That all the committees of Grace undertake a review of their reporting relationships to ensure that ministry vacancies (current or future) do not result in interrupted communications or accountability, to be completed by the end of May 2022.
5. In recognition of some gaps in the reporting and accountability processes, we encourage the HR committee at Grace to undertake a review of the Support Services Director (SSD) position description and report back to Session by March 2022.
6. That the terms of reference for the Interim Moderator at Grace be reviewed by Clergy and Congregational Care in consultation with the General Presbyter, with power to issue, to ensure a reasonable distribution of duties is maintained in the absence of a 'lead' minister.
7. That Grace session be strongly encouraged to form the stewardship committee - with a responsibility for holistic oversight over stewardship of all things - that they will be considering in the new year.
8. That Financial statements be included in Grace's Annual Report in 2022, in order for the congregation to understand the financial health of the church, information of the progress on the church's vision, how donated funds are used, and give insight into how each ministry area specifically uses the funds designated for its purposes.

Respectfully submitted

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Jeff Lackie (convener), Mary Wescott, Sandra Cameron Evans