



## **Environmental Assessment Overarching Analysis of Key Themes Across all Feedback**

### **Serving the Congregation of Today/Creating the Congregation of the Future**

The congregation Fourth Church has today and the congregation it needs to attract and sustain in order to remain a vibrant faith community complicates decision-making about how the church moves into the future. While preaching, music, and the worship experience were identified across all stakeholder groups as a Fourth Church strength and point of distinction, tensions are apparent between older, long-time members—who currently make up a majority of the church census—and younger, newer members. Analysis suggests these groups have divergent opinions about what they want and expect in terms of their worship experience, the type of programs/experiences they want to engage in, and the social justice role and voice of the church. While there is general understanding within the congregation that the church must attract and engage young and more diverse people, many older members expressed a feeling that they are being marginalized/ignored because of the emphasis being placed on finding new, younger members. It will be important to encourage older, long-time members to embrace and help prepare the church for a successful future that may look and be different from their experience.

### **Putting “Church” Into the Plan**

There is consensus that “church” is missing from the current Long-Range Plan. Across all stakeholder groups there is strong support for investing explicit energy, focus, and resources to enhance the church’s capacity to support faith formation and in the worship experience itself.

### **Building A Sense of Belonging/Engagement**

The majority opinion is that the church is moderately effective at engaging existing and new members. All acknowledged the size of the church is and always has been a potential barrier to engagement, and that church size, and the anonymity it offers, is one of the things some people find very appealing attending here. There are many programs and activities available at Fourth Church, but even for those motivated to engage, they can be hard to find. Some suggested that groups/activities comprised of members who have been engaged/volunteered for a long time can be unwelcoming to newcomers. The missing piece noted repeatedly across all assessment reports was a lack of personal invitation. Many suggested the solution is for the church as a whole—pastors, program and administrative staff, lay leadership, members of the congregation to commit to regular and ongoing personal outreach to existing and new members. “Publicity” announcements about programs/activities, which have been the default approach, are not enough. The church needs to create and embed a culture of invitation and active welcome. The peer churches interviewed indicated they are actively working on creating systemized approaches to track outreach and engagement efforts. Second Presbyterian in Indianapolis has plans to begin using Salesforce to help them better capture “leads” and automate outreach tracking and performance to goals. The idea of systematizing Fourth Church outreach tracking was raised by several church staff members.

Making a big church feel “small” was seen as central to building connections within and among the congregation. Groups and activities can be centered around shared life experience, areas of interest and geography. Many people suggested doing more to take the church to the congregation instead of expecting people to always come to the church. Ideas included hosting events/activities in communities/neighborhoods where members live, as well as online for those who attend/engage digitally.

To increase engagement, it was suggested the church should think seriously about understanding and better aligning programs with the changing interests of members. People are busy, and many live distant from the church. Surveys/interviews suggested interest in more short-term activities, programs, and volunteer opportunities—one-off events rather than multi-session programs or long-term commitments. Feedback also noted that younger people are interested in just getting together to hang out and socialize, opportunities they indicated Fourth Church has not explored deeply yet.

#### **Fourth Church Voice/Presence Locally, Nationally**

There is mixed desire for Fourth Church to have a clearer, “louder” voice and presence in Chicago and nationally related to community and social issues. Many interviewees suggested that Fourth has been “missing” from these conversations, and as one of the largest churches in the Presbyterian faith in the US, see that gap as both disappointing and a missed opportunity. Others are uncertain that this is or should be a role for the church. There are also strong voices expressing the opinion that the church should “stay out” of politics, which is how these individuals see these topics. To that end, as one staff member suggested, it will be vital for Fourth Church to be clear about the “why” of its advocacy efforts, not just the “how.”

The peer churches interviewed indicated they are stepping “lightly” in public statements/advocacy on topics like these. The ministers interviewed suggested that because they are often seen through a political rather than faith lens these topics can be/have been polarizing in their congregations and members have been lost due to disagreements.

#### **Racial Equity, Antiracism, LGBTQIA Inclusion**

There is near universal agreement that racial equity and the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ individuals in the church and society are fundamental to the mission of Fourth Church. At the most foundational level, God and the church welcome all, support all. There is a disconnect, however, in views about how this work is being advanced in the church, particularly around the concept of antiracism. Concerns were raised in interviews with all internal stakeholder groups, and in both the staff and congregational surveys, about how the church is addressing equity, inclusion, and antiracism from the pulpit, and about how the REC in particular is advancing this work. A number of commenters noted missed opportunities to make connections between social issues and biblical teaching and the theology of Presbyterian faith. Others felt the subject of antiracism has “taken over,” and that other issues that members of the congregation experience like loneliness, grief, family challenges, exploration of personal faith, are being given short shrift. Opinion may have been loudest in the congregational survey, especially among older congregation members who made up the majority of respondents. It is clear many are deeply unhappy with the emphasis being placed on this work and feel their voices are being ignored or discounted as wrong or “racist.” Comments across all interview groups and survey respondents addressed a perceived “strident and scolding tone” coming from the REC. People shared fears about speaking up with opposing viewpoints or questions about the work, or of being called out and “shamed” for using the “wrong” language in discussions about these topics. It should be noted that younger individuals and those who identify as LGBTQIA or as being from a community of color were more likely to support/strongly support the work the church is doing on these issues and to cite the importance of this work to their future engagement with the church—a concrete example of the complicated challenges of supporting an existing congregation while building the congregation of the future.

## **Programs & Outreach**

Fourth Church has a multitude of programs/activities. Through this environmental assessment process questions were raised about whether these are the right ones and/or whether they are delivering the outcomes the people involved, and the church, want to achieve. Voices from church and program staff and the congregation suggested the church would benefit from an assessment of what the congregation wants, and a data-based evaluation of how current programs are performing/delivering outcomes.

There are existential questions about what the desired outcomes for Fourth Church community outreach programs could or should be. Feeding people every day is powerful, but it does not solve the issue of hunger. Chicago Lights and Fourth Church volunteers have tutored students for years, but it is unclear to what end. Questions exist about the unmet needs experienced by many children in this program—social, emotional, financial—that deeply impact their opportunities to be successful in life. There are no truly right or wrong answers here; getting clarity about what the church aspires to accomplish, and then sharing that intention broadly, would be valuable for informing decisions about what programs the church engages in and in how resources are directed/invested.

Chicago Lights is clearly seen by many in both the congregation and on the staff as embodying the social mission of the church—to be a light in the city. Chicago Lights, along with the church’s geographic location and building itself, were noted repeatedly as central to how the city of Chicago “knows” Fourth Church. At the same time, there are questions about the relationship between Chicago Lights and the church. Fourth Church makes significant investments in Chicago Lights annually (financial underwriting, dedicated space, supportive services—HR, development, security, maintenance) but has little voice in setting expectations for outcomes or impact of Chicago Lights program. Several people expressed the hope that questions about what the future relationship could or should be will be addressed in the Long-Range Plan.

Reprogle Center and the Day School have seen static or declining numbers in recent year. Leaders in both organizations are concerned about the future of their programs. Both acknowledged that reviving/reinvigorating these programs will require an investment of resources—dollars and/or supportive services, particularly fund development and communications. There are questions among church staff/leadership about the future of these programs as well, including whether resources devoted to these programs could better be invested elsewhere.

There is agitation within the staff of programs outside of Chicago Lights about how their programs are supported as compared to how Fourth Church is supporting Chicago Lights. There is strong feeling among these other programs that they are treated unequally, especially in relation to supportive services like communications, fund development, security, and maintenance. This unequal investment makes it challenging/impossible to grow or invest in improvement.

## **External Communications**

The environmental assessment reveals a widely held belief the church needs to do a better job of storytelling and is missing opportunities to connect more personally with members and to market itself to potential new members. People respond to people, and the personality of the church, its members, staff, programs, and message, are missing from church communications. External communications tend to be publicity-oriented (announcing events, etc.) and print-focused; there is concern the church is not leveraging social and digital media platforms effectively, including improving the website which is widely seen as confusing and difficult to navigate. Beyond publicity, there appears to be no defined marketing strategy for the church. It was noted that for a church of its size, the Fourth Church communications department is likely under-resourced.

### **Financial Sustainability**

Costs for programs and staff and for general operations outpace revenues. Opinions about how to use the Church's endowment vary significantly. The Long-Range Plan presents an opportunity for the church to explicitly determine how it will address operating deficits and to make a clear statement of intentions around use of the endowment. Fourth Church staff are aware that a Capital Campaign is planned but are uncertain/unclear about how the money raised will be invested—to support the endowment, address facilities/maintenance issues, invest in programs/staff.

While some church donors interviewed raised questions about the church's social and racial justice efforts, their responses suggest they remain committed to supporting the church financially and believe in the church's ability to navigate these difficult conversations. The interviews also suggested that donor engagement and recognition is an opportunity that should be explored in the Long-Range Plan. Several made note of the "impersonal" nature of the communications they receive—emails and letters, and one noted that they would be willing to increase their monthly donation but had not been personally contacted by Fourth Church development staff in eight years. The feedback suggests that creating and communicating a clear fund development plan, outlining the church's intentions around fundraising and laying out the role and responsibilities of church leadership, staff, committees, and congregation, would be beneficial.

### **Organizational Structure & Culture**

Fourth Church is a large and complex operation. The staff interviews and survey revealed many staff feel the church is home to a group of disconnected organizations that do not have a shared sense of mission or cohesion. There are many things going on, but those things appear to be happening in isolation from one another. People working in/volunteering at the church are not seen as working in alignment or toward the same goals. Several staff explicitly noted there is little to no progress/performance tracking which in their view undermines accountability in the organization. Collaboration among programs, ministries, and people tends to be episodic. Staff and leadership expressed a desire for an organizational structure that encourages active identification of natural points of connection/collaboration and values/supports this work.

Decision-making in the church is complex, hierarchical, and opaque to many. While a few staff members identified the Senior Leadership Team as a strength for the organization, many more had questions about its role and responsibilities, about how its agendas are set, and how decisions are made. Program staff members (except for Chicago Lights) expressed frustration that they rarely meet with committees/councils to provide information or participate in discussions/decision-making about their programs. The Session/Committee structure also means that decisions take a long time, limiting the ability of programs and the church to respond agilely to changes.