

Report on Peacham Congregational Church Interview Process

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In 2020 the Peacham Congregational Church established a Church Planning Committee composed of church and non-church members to develop a Long-Range Plan for the church. The plan is intended to guide the church's growth as both a religious institution and a community meetinghouse. The Planning Committee has finished a draft Long-Range Plan and is in the process of getting public feedback on it. In October 2021 there was a Zoom community meeting, following which the Committee conducted more than three dozen interviews with members of the Peacham community. With this input, and any further input it may receive from the community in the near future, the Planning Committee is revising the draft plan.

To facilitate the revisions and get further feedback, the Committee is summarizing in this report the more than 200 comments that it received about the Draft Plan in its interactions with the community. If you wish to be interviewed about this draft report or the draft plan, please contact Barry Lawson, Chair of the Planning Committee (802.592.3632 or brlnl@yahoo.com). The Committee will also be posting a simple online survey about the future of the church and scheduling an additional community meeting seeking comments on this report and the draft plan. We want as much feedback from the community as possible.

This summary of comments (mostly from community interviews) is grouped, as in the draft plan, in three categories: the Church as a Religious Institution; the Community Meetinghouse; and Community Outreach.

Selected summary points are in **bold**. Public comments are bulleted.

The Church as a Religious Institution

Interfaith Approach

The current approach of the church is to continue Christian congregational worship but also to link Christianity to different traditions in weekly services; open the meetinghouse to services by other faiths; organize interfaith activities; take an interfaith approach to church missions, and generally promote and broaden understanding of the rich tapestry of different interpretations of spiritual traditions while continuing Christian ministry. In response to this effort, **respondents at the community meeting and in the interviews expressed a variety of perspectives, from whole-hearted support to concern that some time-honored Christian themes were being sidetracked in the process.**

- Love the current interfaith approach and the concept of “radical hospitality” or acceptance of other views beyond our own

- Spiritually, Peacham is eclectic . . . (the church) is moving in the right direction
- Remember, Jesus loved everyone and Christianity is not the only way to live life
- In the draft plan, the focus is all on interfaith services . . .no mention of any goals regarding the church's Congregational roots
- Not a favorable feeling about interfaith services; I want the word of God, not other religions that are not my own
- It is a Christian church and some people may not be looking for services centered around other religions
- Interfaith services, activities and education should take place outside of the Sunday (Christian) service

Church Membership

The Church has recently revised its membership categories to include *Associate Members* – friends of the church and/or the meetinghouse who do not subscribe to its Statement of Faith., The purpose is to encourage those in the community who benefit from the church in one form or another (but are not currently members) to establish a more direct relationship. While most comments supported the new category, there were concerns or suggestions:

- Church needs to have a recruitment plan for new members
- The different membership categories should be spelled out more clearly
- Opening up membership to Associates with expanded voting rights on issues could lead to non-members having greater voting power than regular church attending members

Church Governance and Committee Structure

The draft plan outlines the various committees, their roles and the manner by which the Church makes important decisions via these committees. **Comments from interviewees centered on clarifying the roles of the committees, improving communication, and clarifying who has what authority in decision making for the church.**

- **Fundamentally, church members, including associate members, govern the church and its meetinghouse**, and this needs to be communicated regularly to members along with information about the authority delegated to committees and officers and a healthy discussion of the circumstances under which members should exercise their authority to modify decisions made by the church's committee or officers
- Communication among committees and between committees and the membership of the church needs to improve
- Where there is information to be exchanged, it should be in a form that is easy for all members to access
- A review of the role of each committee, how often each meets, and eliminating overlaps in job descriptions could reduce the number of committees and meetings and relieve the burden of many church members serving on multiple committees.

- Burnout may be a problem, if not now, soon, with the church depending on a few people trying to do too much..

Church Plans and Planning Effort

There was an overriding desire to have the church leaders think about the future, make the best use of limited financial and labor resources, and to guide the church [onto the future].

- Talk to other churches that may find themselves in a comparable situation so that we might learn from others
- Church needs a business plan, a strategic plan and a marketing plan for public relations

Church Youth Activities

Interviewees focused almost entirely on addressing the needs of the town's teenage population. A few of the interviewees were once, in their teen-age years, part of a church youth program that provided opportunities for music, games, even camping, with leadership provided by parents and other adults. Some analysis of options available and the experience of other towns and churches would be a first step in addressing youth activities.

Pastoral Services

People would like the Church to continue what it has done well in the past: address the needs of older parishioners, shut-ins, and those hospitalized.

Major Goal # 2 – The Community Meetinghouse

Peacham depends on the church sanctuary and social hall for most of the major indoor events in town. **As one person who is not a church member said, “The meetinghouse should stand forever – it is a high priority to keep its integrity.”**

The Meetinghouse Building and Possible Annex

Among the many comments received during the interview process were the following:

- **Would love to see additions to the kitchen and dining area;**
- An annex to the building could help provide additional storage and meeting space, especially during the week (when the Childrens Center is operating)
- Like the idea of a new dishwasher in the kitchen – high priority
- The roof-like awning on the east side of the building is dangerous and out of character with the rest of the meetinghouse
- Architectural details are important as facades get modified

- **In a fund-raising program, identify a group of small investments so as to minimize the number of campaigns required over the next, say, five years**

Equipment and Appliances

There were differing opinions on equipment needs.

- **Why do we need an elevator?** I am not in favor
- **We need an elevator for the elderly and handicapped**
- The church needs more storage and meeting space
- The sound system needs improvement
- The kitchen is under utilized, cupboard space could be made more efficient
- **I don't see need for improvements to the kitchen**
- Favor the church participating on solar net metering in the community

Outside Property, Parking, Landscaping and Signage

The church parking lot serves not only the church, the Café, and the Childrens Center, it is also used during large events in town.

- I think there is a safety issue (for walkers) with the new drains installed in the parking area
- We should cut away soil on sides of lot to **flatten the potential parking areas and provide more space**
- Should we pave the driveway? We need to reduce the amount of sand traipsed into the church
- Some people, e.g., minister and church administrator, should have **designated reserved parking spaces**
- I don't see any need for a site plan (recommended in the draft plan)

Major Goal # Three – Outreach to the Community, Church Missions

We welcomed **many suggestions for the church extending its outreach into the community.**

Public Events in the Meetinghouse

- **Suggest that the church, library, PHA and café co-sponsor events for which each can take credit and receive benefit**
- **The church plan should reflect Mel Reis's plan [commissioned by the church] that emphasized increased public use of the meetinghouse**

- Love the sense of community, and use of the meetinghouse for other purposes like music
- Local professionals can share their expertise in the creative use of meetinghouse space
- **One idea: have pot luck dinners that are unique to various countries. Another idea: have fund-raising dinners to support local organizations and initiatives**
- I drew up a list of creative suppers the church had over the years – let's do more!
- Let's have more talks and presentations about the environment, peoples' interesting experiences
- The (meetinghouse) calendar should be planned and structured on an annual basis

Communication Between the Church and Community

- **Work with the elementary school and others to make new residents in town feel welcomed; sponsor gatherings to introduce newcomers to the town and its organizations**
- **Outreach is driven by ministry: constantly let everyone know what's going on in church services and pastoral care, what the church is doing**
- Improve outreach to church visitors – this should be a priority
- **Inform people that the church is open for events and different uses**
- Publicize lay preachers - posters.
- The church should keep a log, with pictures of everything it does during a year

Cooperation and Coordination Among Town Groups

An important mission of the church is to extend a cooperative hand to other groups in Peacham in serving and protecting vulnerable friends and neighbors. Interviewees suggested:

- PHA and church both have storage issues - perhaps they collectively can evolve a plan such as using the Science Building
- Good idea to have the church and library (and possibly other towns) cooperate on what they offer for venue and programs, including adult education
- Create relationships with other organizations that can help with applying and receiving grants

Peacham Childrens Center

The collaboration between the church and the Peacham Childrens Center illustrates how the church can partner with another organization(s) to provide an important service to the community. Comments from interviewees included:

- The church's draft plan ignores the Center's important benefits and speaks of challenges from the Center, which is negative; **the church needs to emphasize the positive benefits of the Center and focus on new activities of this nature, but not to the exclusion of traditional (church) activities**
- **The Church should leverage the Children's Center as a "great opportunity"; parents might be offered church's hospitality with, for example, coffee to go when they drop off a child in the morning**
- (We are) grateful for the childrens center promoting (and underwriting) improvements in the building
- The Children Center has been explained as being without financial cost to the church, **but now it (the church) has to raise money to build storage space and weekday meeting facilities [to replace space lost to the Center]**
- The church plan needs to make a realistic assessment of what community events can or cannot now take place in the basement and adjust expectations for groups who want to use the space

Church Missions

The church plan envisions more missions such as the popular food drives as significant elements of the church's plan for outreach.

Comments on the mission work of the church include:

- The church should provide data on each mission- priority, how long, how much raised, what it does, etc., and publicize this
- **The church should be a community leader but reach out for volunteers to help support each mission**
- **Should be involved in popular narratives such as: climate emergency, Wire America, agricultural emergencies (e.g., loss of farms), solar initiatives, all electric future, etc.**

Congregational Church History

The Planning Committee has started to prepare materials on the church's rich history for visitors. **Interviewees strongly supported publicizing the history of the church and its historical role in the community:**

- PHA can help celebrate (publicize) the history of the church
- Perhaps the town could have small building where visitors could get information about the town and its buildings - warm place for information
- Peacham Congregational Church history: A perfect "Yankee" article!

Thank you

The Planning Committee thanks the many people who offered their time to read the draft report and give feedback, including constructive criticism. It is the Committee's sincere hope that the revised church plan will satisfy most of the expectations, fully recognizing the inevitability that some decisions may be made that not all agree with.