

# **Church Assessment Tool (CAT)**

## **Executive Summary**

### **Covenant Presbyterian Church**

#### **June 2022**

The CAT was recently administered in Covenant Church during June 2022. 121 persons responded, representing 86% of current average Sunday attendance; 65% of pre-COVID Sunday attendance. To achieve valid, reliable and representative data, you needed to achieve a 33% participation rate. In addition, your responses have been benchmarked against other churches in the Holy Cow! Consulting database (who have taken the CAT over the last 22 months) to determine what is typical and what is exceptional about your congregation.

#### **Congregational Climate**

Two characteristics are needed to be a vital congregation – high levels of satisfaction and energy. Satisfaction is the sense of peaceful contentment and joy when being with one another within the congregation. Energy is force of engagement in mission or the passion with intention and a compelling sense of purpose within the congregation. Overall, approximately 30% of the responders are clearly satisfied with how things are here. 39% feel that there is a compelling sense of purpose or energy and members are not just going through the motions in their ministry/activity. Notably, in both the measure of satisfaction and energy approximately one-third to half of the responders are on the fence. This indicates that many people are waiting to see what is going to happen next before affirmatively stating whether they are clearly satisfied or energized. Compared to other congregations nationally, Covenant's overall vitality is low.

This indicates that Covenant is understood as a *Recovery* congregation where both the work itself and the people working within the system are in need of recovery of a strong sense of confidence, purpose and mission. As a recovery system, you may find that any combination of factors has led to an erosion of morale. Often the stated goal of recovery congregations (and this is true for Covenant) is reaching new members. However, it is difficult to make a compelling case to prospective members in a church where one-third of the congregation is on the fence or indicate they are simply going through the motions of religious activity and half are not clearly positive about the way the church is being operated. According to this data, you may benefit from taking time to determine what is working well within the system, what is not working effectively, and how to align your operations and ministries with a purpose, mission and vision for a preferred future.

In summary, the long-term strategy is the articulation of a common purpose and mission, shifting loyalty to the larger church, accepting accountability and

discipline with regard to that common mission. In order to engage in the articulation, you must first address the nature of those aspects of your congregation life (both current and past) that have caused an erosion of morale to empower you forward.

### **Areas of Focus and Critical Success Factors**

To determine how satisfied people are here, you are focusing on five different areas or drivers. If people perceive you are performing well in these five areas then the data would suggest that their perception of their satisfaction will go up. Likewise, if people perceive that these five areas are not performing well, then their satisfaction levels will go down. Given your low satisfaction and energy, the following areas require attention. Your five areas of satisfaction focus are:

1. We are willing to adapt our worship to the needs and circumstances of the people we want to reach in our local community (Flexibility)
2. The whole spirit of the congregation makes people want to get as involved as possible (Morale)
3. Our church provides opportunities for education and formation in a variety of ways so that we can find one that fits our complex lifestyles (Education)
4. Our church does a good job helping each member understand that he or she is called to ministry (Ministry)
5. In important decisions in our church, adequate opportunity for consideration of different approaches is usually provided (Governance)

There are three areas of energy focus. They are:

1. The whole spirit of the congregation makes people want to get as involved as possible (Morale)
2. Persons who serve as leaders in our church are representative of the membership (Governance)
3. In important decisions in our church, adequate opportunity for consideration of different approaches is usually provided (Governance)

An interesting pattern is revealed by these drivers. Currently you are particularly focused on the work of your governance leaders. This reveals a characteristic that is not true for all congregations, but for you at this moment in time. You are considered an authority-centric congregation. Authority-centric congregations experience the share of the work of the congregation being carried by its leaders and therefore, how members evaluate the work of leadership is the lens through which they view the entire church. Combining your responses to the satisfaction and energy questions, this pattern reveals a level of anxiety in the congregation. Perhaps it is your clergy transition or other issues. In either case, the

congregation appears to be looking to leadership to ensure a positive future. It will be important for you to discuss and address this anxiety.

There are five areas (of important urgency) that need attention and where improvements will have the greatest impact on the satisfaction level of members:

- Change our worship to reach others.
- Plan educational and formation programs to meet complex lifestyles.
- Improve the spirit of involvement.
- Provide different decision making approaches
- Assist members in understanding their call to ministry/service.

### **Future Priorities/Aspirations**

As the members look at the future, eight major priorities emerged:

1. Make necessary changes to attract families and young people.
2. Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people.
3. Provide more opportunities for Christian education and spiritual formation.
4. Create more opportunities to form meaningful relationships.
5. Work to renew and revitalize the community around the church by building coalitions with partners.
6. Develop ministries that work toward healing those broken by life circumstances.
7. Strengthen the management and support of persons in various ministries.
8. Work as an advocate for social and institutional change.

While the majority of these priorities are typical of congregations, the eighth priority is unusually high on the list and may indicate a unique need within your congregation for timely and effective responsiveness to societal concerns. Furthermore, worthy of note is that aside from growth as indicated in the first two priorities, our next two priorities are internally focused. A characteristic of a vital and healthy congregation is its external focus. This is worthy of future congregational conversation. Furthermore, this list indicates that these priorities are seen as essential to the future of the congregation, yet there was little distinction about which priorities come first. Part of the work of congregational leaders will be to discern where it is best to begin.

### **Performance Areas**

**Your strengths and challenges are revealed and explained through the Performance Dashboard and Performance Indices.** You assessed the congregation in the following eight areas:

- **Hospitality**
- **Morale**
- **Conflict Management**
- **Governance**
- **Spiritual Vitality**
- **Readiness for Ministry**
- **Engagement in Education**
- **Worship and Music**

All eight indices compare less favorably with other congregations. This is true because you view the work of the congregation through the lens of your lack of satisfaction and energy (low morale).

However, this does not mean that these areas are necessarily low in performance, but indicates that among congregations nationally, you are below average in these areas.

Hospitality measures the degree to which members perceive that the congregation is engaged in offering themselves and their resources to folks who are new, different or in need. You believe that you have a friendly atmosphere of genuine care and concern and that you are prepared to welcome persons from many difference walks of life into your congregation. Given your low morale you are just not as enthusiastically positive about your hospitality as other congregations. Yet you can see this aspect of your congregation as a relative strength that you can lean into.

Morale expresses your strong engagement in our communal life and your clear sense of purpose and mission as a congregation. This is a key area for your work as a Recovery congregation.

Conflict management measures the degree to which members believe that conflict is managed and, where possible, resolved. This is the area that deserves your attention. Almost one-third of your congregation believe that there is a disturbing amount of conflict and that you need to improve how you resolve issues through mutual effort and how you can better create an atmosphere of tolerance of differing opinions and beliefs.

Governance measures the degree to which members believe that the decision-making structures and processes of the church are open to their concerns and input. Your rating indicates that the congregation positively perceives Session leadership, yet is not empathic. However, the congregation's trust allows you to use your leadership in ways that move the congregation strategically forward, creatively re-thinking how you engage the needs of members as well as the needs of those you are trying to reach in your community.

Spiritual Vitality measures the degree to which members believe that their faith is central to their lives. This aspect of your congregation is low, in part because of progressive theology. Progressive congregations typically score lower in spiritual vitality. While you do demonstrate some strength in this area, you do not compare as favorably to other congregations. Unique to this index is its direct correlation to financial giving to the church. Research shows that the closer people feel to God, the more they contribute to their churches. This correlation appears relatively strong given your low morale. The percent of household income given to your church is 2.48%, above the national average for PCUSA (approx.1.9%). This measure is a strength to celebrate. Imagine what you could achieve if you address morale and anxiety in your midst.

Readiness for Ministry registers your understanding of your baptismal call to serve. You show strengths in the areas of providing opportunities to serve in ministry and how you support those serving. Three areas that require discussion and improvement are how you help members understand their call to ministry, how you prepare them to discern their gifts for ministry, and how you support people in their ministries. This measure indicates a desire on the part of members to be more involved in the ministries of the church and requires your attention around expectations of being in mutual ministry with your clergy and lay leaders.

Engagement in Education: While you are motivated toward life-long learning, your scores indicate that you can improve the quality of your programming. Given that Christian education is the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest priority for your congregation, this area requires action.

Worship/Music are a primary indicator of congregation vitality, and essential for growth. Your congregation favorably experiences your music. The other aspects of worship, including the presiding, preaching, pace of the liturgy, ease of participation and panache (aesthetics) require some improvements. Your scores are mixed. These results offer us an opportunity to talk about your worship experiences and where you might focus energy to improve the experience. If your worship seems lackluster to you, then visitors and newcomers will perceive the same. Flexibility in your worship experiences is a top factor for improving congregational satisfaction worthy of important study, discussion and experimentation.

### **What else did we learn?**

#### **Our congregation's culture:**

- While we are theologically progressive, 10% of our congregation is more theologically conservative. Our ability to hold together and learn from these different perspectives could be an important strength in attracting new members.
- Our flexibility style registers the degree to which, as a congregation, we are willing to make adjustments or experiment with the ways we go about

our ministry to connect with our local context. In this area we demonstrate that we are somewhat settled. Our indicators suggest that we seek renewal, change and growth, and yet we appear somewhat uncomfortable in making changes to achieve our goals. This is an area that invites thorough conversation. How might we go about renewal as a “settled” congregation? In incremental ways? How might we experiment with new ways in aspects of our congregational life and learn from those experiments? Research indicates that adaptability to our context, like any organization, is essential in our ability to grow and thrive as a congregation. Our comfort with status quo is dissonant with our desire for growth.

- In correlating Theological perspective and Flexibility, we have learned that we demonstrate a “Paraclete or Holy Spirit” culture. Paraclete cultures are ultimately concerned with the development of communities that are intellectually open and reflective, but pay attention to structure and ritual. It is common in Paraclete cultures to hear folks talk about hospitality, inclusiveness and spiritual practice. Paraclete cultures are also uniquely equipped to focus on ministries of healing because of their openness. When Paraclete cultures lose their sense of identity and missional focus, they may retreat into a cycle of well-intentioned activity that is not fruitful nor are they aligned with mission or aspirations. And their admirable tendency to accept people where they are does not offer adequate levels of accountability.

In summary we have learned that we are a congregation with some gifts and assets. We have a desire to grow/change as part of strategies for the future. Yet we have learned that we are in a critical moment in the congregation. We have some work to do: addressing anxiety in our system, addressing those aspect of our communal life that have negatively impacted morale, improving key aspects of our communal life, i.e., identity and mission, and learning the skills needed for a 21<sup>st</sup> century church – adaptive leadership and flexibility.

In undertaking this important work together, we will do what is necessary to become a healthier and more vibrant congregation for the future. In order to attain our vision for the future (our listed priorities) we must align them with an entrepreneurial spirit and care for each other as we ease into innovative ways of doing things and perhaps grieve the loss of some things that have been familiar/comfortable. Foremost, we must remain grounded in a deep spiritual life.

Thank you for your participation in this important exercise of self-study and planning for our future. We do look forward to the on-going conversations and to the work that the CAT results are calling us to.