

Transition Team Take-aways from Spring 2023 Community Conversations

1. We were used to a very minister-centric style, with much of the congregational energy and engagement dependent on the personal charisma of the minister. We carried many of the norms from Jeff's time with us forward as more or less unexamined assumptions about what ministers do and what ministers are like. This made it difficult to adjust to a minister who had a very different personal style, and who brought a different set of assumptions about congregational life to the job.
2. We are not skillful at handling the kinds of conflicts that are common in any organization such as personality conflicts (e.g. "Rev. Elizabeth is not friendly") and differences of opinion (e.g., "We should / should not return to in-person services while COVID is still an epidemic"), among others. We don't really have a well-understood model for surfacing and resolving things like this in a constructive way. When people were unhappy, it wasn't always clear to them where to go or who to talk to. People did not necessarily view the Standing Committee members as their elected representatives to whom they could address a problem or issue. While conflicts with Rev. Elizabeth were being addressed by the Standing Committee this process was confidential and not transparent to the congregation. Rumors spread, folks had triangulated conversations, and as anxiety mounted, some people took action on their own, not always in constructive ways.
3. There was a lot of congregational behavior that some (perhaps many) found troubling or harmful such as gossip, rumors, secretive "back-channel" communications, and debate via email. However, there is no consensus about which actions were harmful and which were not. Likewise, there is no consensus about what, if anything, we need to do to resolve remaining tensions within the congregation. We lack a common understanding of basic relational norms – what is acceptable and what is not. The congregation remains divided on whether harm was caused by the way in which we dealt with Rev. Elizabeth, and if harm was caused, what should be done about it. While some people feel a need for naming and accounting for harmful actions, others just want to "put it all behind us" and move forward.
4. In our first three Community Conversations much of the focus was on blaming Rev. Elizabeth for things that went badly. We didn't agree on what we didn't like, but things had gone wrong. We added a fourth conversation particularly to focus our attention on the role the congregation itself played in what went wrong. This helped the congregation's focus shift to identifying what we didn't know about things like shared ministry, what more we might have done to welcome Elizabeth, and how to deal with our concerns sooner and in a more direct way.