

Congregational History Gathering Event
Held in Lund Hall on Monday, December 11, 2006

Note: The following attempts to summarize and draw some conclusions from what was reported as well as discussed at this event. The conclusions listed here are probably not the only ones that may emerge from the event. Therefore, the material contained here is not definitive, etched in stone material. It's fluid and will hopefully stimulate and hence further conversation about the past (and future) of this unique congregation. And it may mean more in light of the data from the surveys and the narratives of the cottage meetings.

The Purpose:

To gather together members of the community to celebrate, recall and observe the remembered history of the congregation.

The process:

Large sheets of white paper were put on the wall. A continuous timeline dating back to 1712 (the settling of the church) until the year 2006 was marked. The line was divided into segments representing the pastorates of all pastors/senior pastors. Below the line was marked Ridgefield population as officially reported in ten year increments. On the paper above the timeline was marked reported church membership and church attendance as reported in Annual Reports of the church clerk. The information was listed beginning in 1940 and up to the present. The Annual reports began showing worship attendance beginning in 1956, and the way of calculating changed in 1989 to *not include July and August numbers*.

People in attendance were then asked to speak anything they remember in their time in the life of the church. All items mentioned were posted, none were excluded. At the end of approximately one and a half hours we began to discuss possible patterns that may be emerging, congregational behavioral consistencies, etc.

The event was video tape recorded for the archives and for member to view who could not be in attendance. It is in unedited form.

What we noted and what it may mean.

1. During the years from the late 1950's to 1970 the population of Ridgefield went from 3,000 to 18,000. In that same time the membership of the church moved from a consistent range around 250 members to a high in 1969 of 1000. In the decades since 1970 the town has added 1 or 2 thousand population to a reported 2000 census of 23, 643.
2. While the population of the town dramatically increased and the membership of the church followed suit, worship attendance has not stayed in proportion. In 1955 with a membership of 200, 135 was the average attendance. In 1965 membership was 870, worship attendance 300. In the time since worship attendance statistics have been recorded (since 1956) worship attendance has generally moved between the 200 – 300 levels but tending toward the lower end of that range.
3. Even during the years when Rev. Nigh was senior pastor and membership spiked at 1600 in the year after he left for Florida, worship attendance peaked at 536 (but remember that doesn't include in that average attendance during the summer months of July/August.) The average attendance was probably more accurately around 500 for the entire year.
4. The congregation *twice in the last 35 years* has grown in size to the point where there was a concerted move to leave the present campus and build a new one in another location. In 1970 (at a

membership of 1000) the church by a handful of votes decided to remain at 103 Main despite having another larger piece of property. In the year following that decision, 350+ people left the church. In 1994 with membership on the increase and well over 1300 another attempt to move to a larger campus was rejected. This was understood as a contributing factor in the decision of Rev. Nigh to leave. Churches often desire to grow and some do better than others with the changes in the *type of church* they are as they change in size. It would seem that this congregation will tolerate growth to a certain point, but that it is unwilling to move beyond that point. Decisions to stay put predictably result in a change in numbers and thus achieved the effect of getting ministry back to a place where the majority of members feel comfortable.

5. The large growth here during 1985-1995 was due to a number of key factors. First the faithfulness, charisma and hard work of Rev. Nigh. The church also benefited by some conflict at other town congregations, as membership in churches in Ridgefield has a certain fluidity because of the vast majority of town folk who are recent (last 20 years) arrivals. The vast diversity of the congregation also appealed greatly as there was something for everyone, and everyone felt a point of contact here. Bill Nigh was the hub around which this congregation turned. A number of fellowship opportunities existed and the church was involved in many community efforts and ministries. The youth program, which had blossomed during the later part of Rev. Lund's ministry was very connected to Young Life. Community Bible Studies the Job Network, Stephen Ministry, H.O.M.E., Saturday night worship, small groups, and a change in style of congregational leadership all provided places for people to engage.
6. The membership has a long history of youth programs and a stated commitment to them. However, it is evident that the church has always struggled to financially support the position of Youth Minister with a number of shortterm parttime youth pastors and interim youth pastors filling in between times through the early 1990's to the present.
7. The membership of the church also took a downturn in the aftermath of the refusal of Rev. Harwood to accept the call to serve in 1995 and in the absence of a dynamic pastor such as Bill Nigh. A number of long time ministries came to an end (Men's and Woemn's Fellowship groups which has peaked in the mid-70's) ended in the late 90's and early 2000's. Relationships with community ministries became less significant or ended all together.
8. During the early times of Rev. Rosenberger, the church began to develop new directions and connections such as Habitat for Humanity, Small groups training, Wednesday night fellowship, elimination of Saturday night contemporary worship and reconfiguration of the three Sunday worship services, the development of the Columbarium, and the beginning of ChristCare Small Group Ministry. The congregation experienced many changes in style and type of worship, fellowship and ministry. Jane Wilmot – long time music director – left and Linda Van Tassel began her ministry as Minister of Christian Education. Tension and conflict however, led to the end of Rev. Rosenberger's pastorate. It was discussed that part of the difficulty during this time was around some unresolved sorrow, grief and issues left from the somewhat sudden and unexpected departure of Rev. Nigh to Florida.
9. There are a number of points in the history of this congregation where major plans were drawn up for capital improvements, alterations, projects. It would take a long time to finalize plans and then even longer to implement them. Usually the delays are the result of difficulty in raising necessary funds. (The 1987 congregational history prepared for the 275 anniversary is a good source for details about this element of history and congregational personality.)

The event highlighted that this congregation has been through some peaks and valleys, growth spurts and then reductions. In all of that the congregation has been on a constant mission to define and *redefine* itself in light of changing circumstances. Discussions around worship, staffing, missions, and buildings, have a long history and are probably not going to end soon. They reflect the changing needs, desires, expressions of a group of Christians always struggling to understand how best to love God and our neighbor.