



Dear Friends,

The following report is one part of the important long-range planning initiatives undertaken by the Planning and Evaluation Board over the last year to strengthen our worship life and expand the reach of Covenant into the community.

One of the recommendations made by the Worship Task Force and approved by the Session, was to engage the Alban Institute, a leading resource for churches, to help us consider how we may adapt to a changing culture while keeping worship the strong center of our lives together.

John Wimberly, a retired Presbyterian minister and Alban consultant, visited our campus and took part in our services. He met with members of the congregation, Session and staff and has offered broad ideas for enhancing our traditional worship experience.

Inside you'll find his report, which was gladly received by Session on Feb. 10. Any recommendations arising from it will come to Session through the Worship Ministry. We welcome your comments and questions as part of this process.

We hope you'll see this work as a sign of our continued investment in the worship life that we hold so dear and trust God will continue to use to strengthen and bless our growing community.

With hope and gratitude,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John McAlister". The signature is written in a cursive style and is contained within a thin black rectangular border.

John McAlister, Clerk of Session

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lucy Bush Carter". The signature is written in a cursive style.

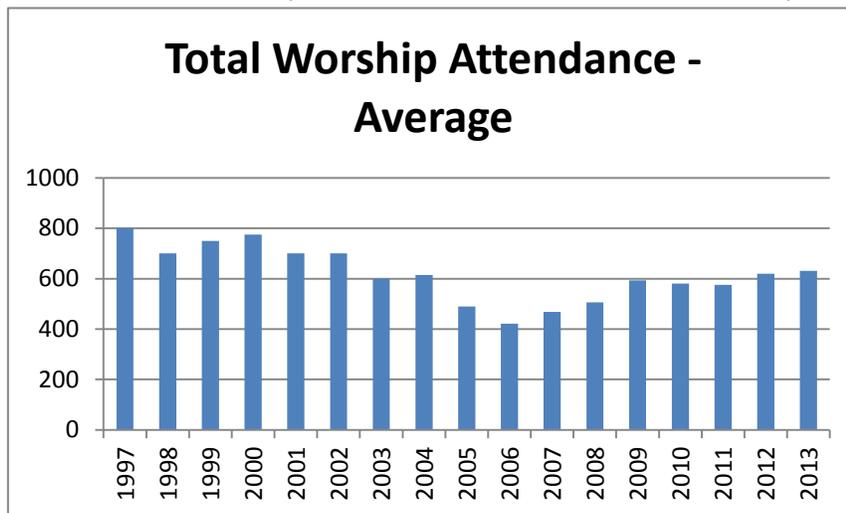
Lucy Bush Carter, Worship Ministry Chair

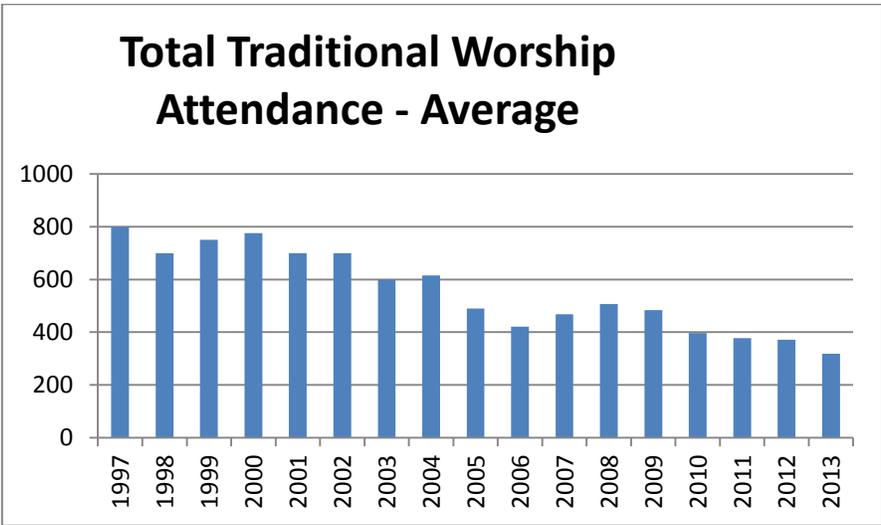
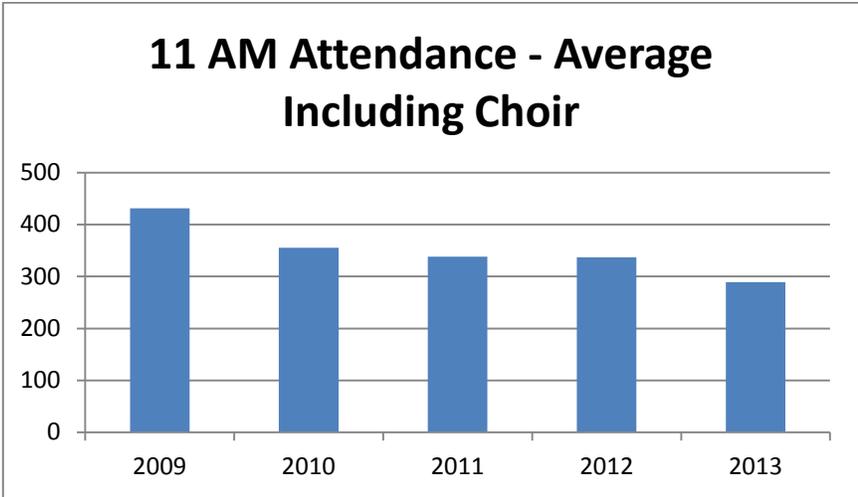


Report for the Traditional Worship Planning Team at Covenant Presbyterian Church, Charlotte  
By John Wimberly, Alban Field Consultant  
January 30, 2014

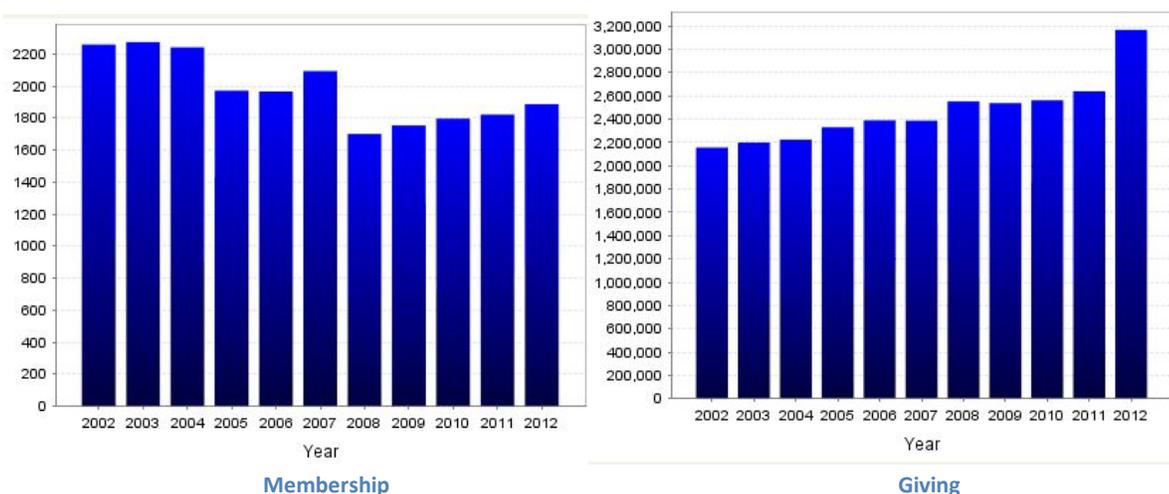
Alban Institute was contacted in the fall, 2013 with a request to provide consulting services as Covenant Presbyterian Church develops a plan for enriching its 11:00 a.m. traditional worship service. The worship service has been a core part of Covenant's ministry since the congregation's inception. A great deal of pride is taken within the congregation regarding the preaching and music at the 11:00 a.m. worship.

The precipitating factor for the consultation is evident in the graphs below. Over the past five years, the service has experienced a 33% decrease in attendance even as overall worship has increased in the same period. The first graph gives overall worship attendance at all services. The second graph shows the attendance trends since 2009 when the 9:30 service was started as a contemporary worship experience. The third graph tracks traditional worship before 2009 when there was no contemporary worship service.





Several key facts reveal that the decline in 11:00 a.m. worship attendance is not indicative of the broader ministry at Covenant: 1) the contemporary worship service continues to grow in attendance; 2) after a large “cleaning” of the membership rolls in 2008, the membership is steadily increasing in numbers; and 3) the stewardship numbers indicate a healthy congregation.



Since the presence of a strong, traditional worship service is a high priority to the congregation, Session and Staff at Covenant, the declining attendance is a trend that needs to be reversed. Covenant’s leadership seeks a traditional worship service that will be a source of spiritual growth for members and attractive to potential new members.

To gain background information on the congregation and the 11:00 a.m. service, Alban’s consultant, John Wimberly, came to Charlotte in early November, 2013 to interview a number of members and staff. He returned on the first Sunday of January, 2014 to meet with the full planning team. This report is a summary of the planning meeting in early January.

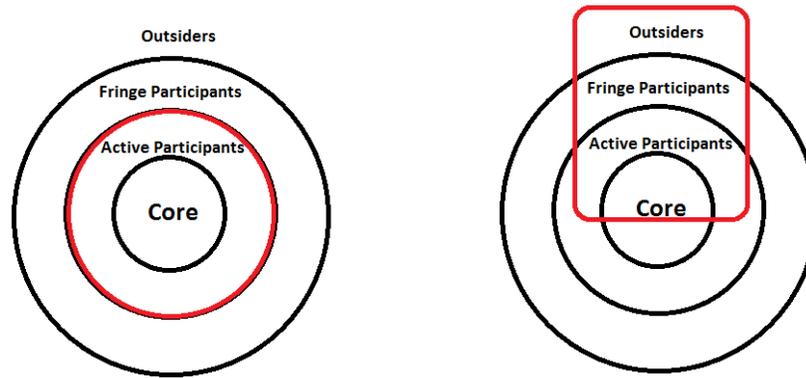
**Process**

The Planning Team’s Retreat consisted of free flowing, wide ranging conversations focused on several key questions:

- What is Worship?
- Who do we seek to attract to the traditional worship service?
- What is the goal of worship at Covenant?
- What are some specific strategies needed to realize the goal through a traditional worship service?
- What are the resources we need to implement the strategies?

We also considered who we want to influence as we made decisions. As the chart below indicates, we considered two models. The first, on the left, focuses on the needs and opinions of the core members of Covenant and active participants in the traditional service. The second model broadens the scope of the people we want to keep in mind as we make decisions. It includes the core, active and fringe participants as well as outsiders who don’t currently attend the traditional service. Since a key goal of this process is to increase the size of attendance at the traditional service, the planning team decided to include all of those in the second model as people whose opinions and needs will influence and shape our decisions.

## Decision Making Rubrics



Decision Boundary

### ***What is Worship?***

This conversation settled in on a number of key points:

- Worship is a time of connecting. As we celebrate the sacraments, sing hymns, hear the Word, and listen to the choir, we feel connected to God and neighbors.
- Worship is lifting up our concerns to God (Prayers of the People).
- Worship is a time when “We lose ourselves” momentarily.
- Worship is a time in which the Gospel is “embodied.”

John Calvin’s comment about the Sacrament of Holy Communion may be a good summary of the group’s discussion of worship: “And, to speak more plainly, I rather experience than understand it.”

### ***Who do we seek to attract to the traditional worship service?***

This lengthy conversation started with a discussion of the many people in the U.S. who tell pollsters they think religion is very or somewhat important (80% of the U.S. population falls into these two categories). Many of these people do not affiliate with a congregation. Many of them are in the younger age groups. There was a quick consensus among the planning team that these are the people we hope to bring into an enriched traditional worship service.

Is such a goal realistic? John Wimberly cited a number of things indicating it is possible to reach this very large group of unaffiliated people:

- The experience of the early church with the Jerusalem Compromise. Peter argued that the church not reach out to the “non-believing” Gentiles but rather focus on the faithful, core members of the early Jerusalem congregation. Paul argued the opposite, seeking to take the Gospel to non-believers. In a famous compromise recorded in Acts, the Jerusalem Church stayed focused on its believing core members while Paul was allowed to start congregations of newly converted Gentiles and former Jews. Paul’s congregations quickly mushroomed in size while the Jerusalem Church was buried in the sands of history.

- Two congregations in Charlotte are growing and thriving with large 11:00 a.m. traditional worship services.
- Author and church growth consultant George Barna says congregations who reach these folks know that, "(Those not currently involved in the church) tend to come when they are struggling with something and they need an answer...They're not coming for an intellectual service. They're coming for an emotional service."
- A recent survey of unaffiliated religious individuals revealed a strong preference for cathedral-style architecture versus a more contemporary look and feel.

As the discussion continued, a number of important issues were identified as key to attracting the religious but unaffiliated demographic:

- Traditional does not have to equate with a "stiff," "rigidly choreographed" or an "overly formal" style. Format cannot overwhelm the content of worship. The planning team developed a strong consensus that we can move from rigidity to relaxed formality in ways that will be welcome by most people.
- The music needs to include some hymns and anthems which will be familiar-sounding to the newcomers.
- Developing a "warm, welcoming feeling" at the traditional service will be imperative. This includes everyone from the ushers to those serving communion to the choir members creating a welcoming atmosphere. This is an example of where form impacts feel. Our goal is to create a form that has a welcoming feel for visitors and members alike.
- Breaking down the invisible but real barrier between what takes place in the chancel area (pastors and choir) and the rest of the worshipping space. Possible strategies:
  - Eliminating a default position for the choir and instead have them sing from the chancel, balcony or aisles as deemed most effective for a particular piece of music and/or liturgical effect.
  - Bring the Bible/Gospel Reading or Prayers of the People into the center of the congregation.

### ***What is the goal of worship at Covenant?***

The Planning Team had a rich discussion regarding the wording of a single goal for Covenant's worship life (both traditional and contemporary). Many words were put on the newsprint:

<i>Emotionally moving</i>	<i>fostering community, warmth,</i>
<i>mystery and drama</i>	<i>accessible, relaxed formality,</i>
<i>losing oneself</i>	<i>compelling, a balance of the familiar and creative</i>
<i>want to come back</i>	<i>adaptability to the anticipated growth</i>
<i>feeling welcome</i>	
<i>hospitable</i>	
<i>invite people into a transformative worship experience</i>	

From these words, the consultant proposes as a rough-draft goal for worship at all of Covenant's worship experiences:

**Our worship invites all to a transformative worship experience in a warm, welcoming environment. We celebrate the mystery and drama of worship, a relaxed formality and the need to balance the familiar with the creative and new. We seek to remain flexible and open to the Spirit as the number of people attending worship grows in the future.**

This goal needs to be refined and reformed by the Planning Team and Session until it crystallizes the congregation's aspirations for worship at Covenant.

***What are some specific strategies needed to realize the goal through a traditional worship service?***

- 1) Build a "welcoming feel" into every aspect of worship
  - a. Ushers need to be trained to view themselves as "welcomers" rather than as people who hand out bulletins and seat people.
  - b. Find ways to bring the people in the chancel into closer contact with those in the pews. It will also make real Covenant's commitment to the Priesthood of All Believers, i.e. the liturgy isn't performed by the clergy and choir but by all the people.
  - c. Balance the familiar with the new. Everything in the service cannot be created for the comfort of long-time Presbyterians. The service needs to include elements that anyone can walk in the door and find accessible and comforting.
  - d. The way in which communion is served has a key impact on the feeling of warmth and welcoming.
- 2) Create a Team Approach to Worship
  - a. The Staff Team needs to work together to generate creative approaches to traditional aspects of worship (recent things done in Advent worship are one example).
  - b. With a team approach, any particular member of the team cannot be satisfied simply by performing his or her role well. The intent is for the worship service to be inspirational as a whole.
  - c. Usher Teams, Communion Teams and others need to be trained in the fundamentals of teamwork.
  - d. Once a task is assigned to a team, don't micromanage. Let them find their own ways to get the task done.
- 3) Music in Worship
  - a. Consider ways to build a "singing congregation" consistent with our Reformed tradition (Goal: the congregation will increasingly feel like a choral body singing with each other).
  - b. Find a mix of music that includes musical selections that will be familiar to all people, not just those people raised in the church.
- 4) Communication and Roll-Out needs to be well thought out
  - a. Changes in worship in the PCUSA are a shared responsibility of the Session and clergy. The Session embraces this responsibility as it takes the lead in developing and explaining proposed changes to worship services.
  - b. Identify possible groups with whom discussions should be held to explain proposed changes such as the Worship Committee, Choir, Fellowship Class, Sharon Towers, Path

Women, boomers who attend the 11:00 a.m. service and key influence-shapers in the congregation. Adding an older member to the Planning Team might also be helpful.

## Conclusion

In many ways, it is easier to start a new worship service than it is to introduce change to an existing service. We tend to forget that Calvin was driven out of Geneva when he first proposed changes to the worship services there! Eventually, reasonable people realized that Calvin's reforms needed to happen, he was invited back to Geneva and his proposed changes were instituted.

Changing the traditional service at Covenant Presbyterian Church must take place. The downward trends are dramatic. If change doesn't come soon, the service will be a mere shell of its former glory. At that point, the likelihood of successful change will be far more difficult than it is today.

There are truly only two options: change or continued decline. As happened in Geneva, there will be resistance to liturgical changes. A good "roll-out" of the plan will reduce but not totally eliminate conflict. However, given the unacceptable alternative of continued decline in attendance, the large, reasonable majority at Covenant will understand the need for change and most will even welcome it.

The call for and specifics of the changes need to flow from the center of authority in Presbyterian polity: elected Elders serving on the Session. When it is inevitably asserted by some that the changes are "staff driven" or by some "small group," the elders need to stand up and stand together in explaining that the proposed changes are coming from the Session, not the staff. The Session authorized a process, brought in a consultant, all possibilities were analyzed and considered, a plan for change was created and the Elders voted to approve the plan.

In general, I am a proponent of incremental change when it comes to worship. However, given the accelerating decline in worship attendance, I would recommend instituting more rather than less of the proposed changes at the beginning. Time is not on Covenant's side on this particular issue. It is crucial that each strategy in the approved plan includes a timeline for the strategy's implementation as well as detail who has the responsibility (and will be held accountable) for each strategy. If the changes are implemented without a lot of missteps, the reasonable majority will see them as the positive reforms they are.

It is also important that once decisions are made, all individuals involved in the decisions, whether they be elders or staff, commit themselves to implementing the changes successfully. Successful teams are not filled with people who agree with all the play calling. They are filled with people who make the plays work that are called.

It is an exciting time of growth at Covenant. It has been a pleasure and privilege to work with you as you initiate changes that will insure the future growth, vitality and faithfulness of your wonderful congregation.

Yours in Christ,

*John Wimberly*

Alban Institute Field Consultant