**Assessment Report: Riverside Community Church, UCC**

November 2019

prepared by Anthony B. Robinson

**Introduction**

Seven years ago you invited me to undertake a Congregational Assessment. Since then you have made excellent use of that assessment for direction-setting and planning. Now, you have graciously invited me back, in 2019, to do a follow-up.

This is my report from the 2019 visit, which took place November 6 - 10, 2019.

As last time, I conducted interviews with members and a few (non-member) friends of Riverside. I also received written survey responses. And I met with the Church Council and hosted a well-attended meeting for any interested Riversiders on Saturday morning. All in all, I spoke with or heard via survey from 70 people, which is pretty close to 50% of your membership. That is outstanding participation. Thank you!

In addition to these meetings and conversations, I also requested and reviewed a variety of written materials like budgets, annual reports, information on pledging, age distribution of the congregation, and your recent building “inspection report.”

I will divide my report into three major sections, “Overview of Riverside, 2019,” “Challenges Ahead,” and “Recommendations.”

**Overview of Riverside Community Church, UCC, 2019**

One of the questions I asked on the written survey and in my interviews was simply, “How happy are you at Riverside?”

Without exception the answers were “Very happy,” “Really Happy” or “Happy.” Your members love their church, and are deeply grateful for its role in their lives and in the community. They are grateful for their pastor and church staff.

This is wonderful, and not to be taken for granted. Moreover, it is a change from 2012 when I noted a “low-level of chronic conflict.” You have taken successful steps to remedy that. Well done!

Now you have a level of enthusiasm and satisfaction that is very high and upon which you may build.

In addition to this overall high level of appreciation and satisfaction, you have made other specific changes that are important.

You moved ahead on becoming “An Open and Affirming” church, which strengthens your identity internally and in the larger community.

Even though you haven’t developed a succinct mission/ purpose statement (not for lack of trying!), you have moved in the direction of a clearer stronger identity. *Remember that if you do move toward a mission/ purpose statement the intended audience is not existing members but those you are trying to reach.* Something as simple as, “Riverside . . . our purpose is to be the Church . . . to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God,” may be just fine and reflect who you have/ are becoming.

You have become more active in the community, really a leading presence on outreach and justice areas. Moreover, you have made your building into a much more active ministry partner. The building is now being used a good deal more than in 2012 by the wider community and various groups within Hood River.

You have also done some important financial “putting your house in order” by consolidating funds and management under a new board for that purpose.

You have widened the purview of the former Music Committee, to Music and the Arts to good effect.

Your recent Building Inspection Report allows you to put your planned maintenance on a schedule and anticipate costs.

Some of the strengths you exhibited in 2012, like the OWL program, seem only to have grown in value.

You have also engaged in several of what we then called “Front Porch” ministries, which moved the church into the community, meeting people where they are. One of these, “Fresh Start” has not continued. But I congratulate you for trying it, for learning and moving on. It is great when churches, often change-resistant, undertake innovations and experiments.

You have also benefited from having a gifted and committed church staff. Not only are they high-quality folks, but your staff has had remarkable stability. Pastor Vicky, Elaine, Lorre and Diana have all being with you for long tenures. While this stability has been a real source of strength, it also poses some challenges which we will get to later under recommendations.

Some other important information to include in this “Overview” is about the age distribution of the congregation as well as the age as a factor in financial support. More than 70% of your membership is over 60. Your staff are more or less in that age cohort as well. And 86% of your pledged giving comes from people in the congregation who are over 65.

Overall then, your church is strong. People are enthusiastic. And you have enjoyed some growth, as compared with 2012, in the under age 45 category. And yet, as I said in the after church session on Sunday, Nov. 10, you are at the edge of a generational shift. There is a need to strengthen the presence and participation of people under age 50, or in the Gen-X and Millennial generations. (Note: I understand that generalizations about generations are just that, generalizations to which there are and will be many exceptions. One ought to be cautious about characterizing “Boomers as all this” or “Millennials as all that.” Still, there is some value in the use of such markers, if not taken too far.)

**Challenges Ahead**

Let me start by calling out what seem to me the most significant “major challenges” you face, followed subsequently by a fourth section of recommendations, many of which many of which address these major challenges.

As I noted in conclusion to the previous section, a big challenge is strengthening the presence and participation of people under 45 or 50. In the open meeting on Saturday someone observed, “We have more younger people than we used to . . . but is it enough?” The answer is “no.”

In the next chapter of Riverside’s life, I’d suggest giving greater priority to reaching and growing the Gen-X (born between 1965 and 1982) and Millennial (1983 to 2001) generations in your congregation, empowering members of these generations for leadership, and engaging their participation and support. This is not an easy challenge. It is one many mainline churches are facing. And you are already doing better than many.

One note of caution in this regard: often members of my generation, the Boomers (1946 to 1964), have felt quite certain that the best way to reach younger people is to de-emphasize the religious aspects of church, things like prayer, bible-study, worship, belief in God, Jesus, etc. In place of these things the idea was to emphasize outreach, social action and being a caring community.

While this kind of adjustment did often appeal to Boomers, it does not appear to be true of subsequent generations. Indications are, on the contrary, there is a desire among people in these younger generations for the church to be the church, to be a place and people where they encounter God and the holy, where people are not embarassed by Christian faith or speaking of God’s presence, and are intentionally helped to grow in their faith and spiritual life. Often this is joined to an interest in social justice and to participating in movements for social change, but it tends to be a both/and not an either/ or. Here’s a reference to a recent helpful study on what Millennials look for in a church. <https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/what-happens-when-a-millennial-walks-into-your-church/?id=li20190918>

I encourage you not to fall into the old trap or conventional wisdom that the way to make church more accessible is to downgrade “all that faith and God stuff.” In an increasingly post-Christian, post-church era it is “religious stuff,” done with authenticity, for which people who chose (it is a choice and no longer an obligation) church often are looking. What they tend to not want is a complex institutional apparatus and the assumption that the serving on Boards and Committees is the best way to be a part of the congregation.

One final somewhat parenthetical remark. For some people my age this discussion will make us feel bad or sad that our own kids are not involved in church and that we have to change that. Let that one go. Of course, if they come, great. But take the young people God brings you and don’t get hung up on guilt or shoulds about your own kids.

Let’s take another step under this theme of “generational shift.” You not only stand at the edge of a necessary generational change in the congregation’s make-up, but in your staff as well.

As I noted above, you have an excellent staff who have provided Riverside remarkable stability. But most staff members are within 5 years of retirement age. That does not mean everyone you now have will be gone then. I don’t know that. But you are looking, in all likelihood, at a big turnover in the not too distant future.

Additionally, when you have long term staff the tendency is to slip behind on compensation. Take a close look at where you are and begin to make adjustments so you are not trying to make giant leaps all in one future year.

I would also note that in the minister employment area, the pool of capable candidates under age 45 in the UCC is not a deep one. Of late, I have heard from many congregations who have been surprised to have only a few candidates to even consider and fewer still that were strong candidates.

To be sure, there are wonderful and gifted younger people coming along in ministry, just not many of them. So, this is a just a little bit of a heads-up as you look down the road. To the extent possible, planning for staff changes and leadership transitions, should become intentional and a priority.

**Recommendations**

1. Give attention and focus to the question of “Who are we (Riverside) trying to reach?” Or to put it in business language, “What or who is our market?” (In this connection, the Communications Committee and Council should carefully analyze the “Mission In-Site” study of your area, available from your conference. I also gave a copy of it to your Moderator, Michael.

Traditionally, I suspect your market was, by and large, established Hood River families, long-time in the community, often in agriculture, and who, while not rich, were relatively well-off. As a percent of the whole, that portion of the Hood River population is diminishing.

So, who is Riverside for? I see four constituencies (these are not listed in priority order).

One, *recent retirees* to Hood River area who are looking for a church/ community and a way to get connected here.

Two, *“former something else’s,”* by which I mean former Catholics, former Mormons, former evangelicals. You already have quite a high number of former Catholics, including your pastor. You might want to think about how you can more intentionally target these folks.

A decade ago the UCC published a really good booklet on “Catholics in the United Church of Christ,” written by Mary Luti and Andrew Warner, both UCC ministers who are themselves former Catholics. I’d suggest you get a hold of that and see if it suggests to you things you might consider. Just to be clear, I am not suggesting “sheep stealing.” I am suggesting that you may be just the church for some who want a church with more openness, inclusivity and social justice emphasis than where they were raised.

Three, *millennials who want their church with a serving of social justice.* Again, don’t downgrade the faith aspect, but alongside it, stress service and justice and help people get involved — without necessarily joining a Board. I think it is probably fair to say that Millennials and X’ers are less interested in serving on Boards/ Committees and are more interested in actual, hands-on ministry/ service.

Four, *people who are in your building regularly or occasionally* but who are not members of Riverside. These include AA groups, kitchen users, traffic classes, community meetings, attendees at concerts or art shows, families who have kids in OWL but don’t already have a church of their own, people who use or volunteer for the Warming Shelter or similar programs.

Who you are trying to reach needs to influence your communication and programming strategies, which leads to my next set of recommendations. Overall, I recommend less focus on your current/ existing membership and more on the potential growth groups I have cited (and you may think of other groups). This doesn’t mean you neglect the folks that are already here, nor will you. But it means everyone developing an “outward orientation.”

Who you are trying to reach should also show up in worship and prayer. Pray for God to send you people who are seeking God and who need a church. Such prayers in worship also awaken the congregation to this concern.

But you also have to think about this, “What do we offer for those who may come to us, looking for God, looking for faith, looking for community? And how well do we help them get connected?”

2. So . . . communicate and program with who you are trying to reach in mind. Your Communications Team or Task-Force is doing some good work. Your on-line newsletter is really attractive. And much more needs to be done.

Priority needs to be placed on upgrading and maintaining your website. It is the way most people under 45 first connect to a church. Add more emphasis on/ use of social media. Neither of these are particularly in the wheel-house of those of us of the Boomer generation. So you may need to sub-contract some of this work to someone who gets this stuff. Future hiring/ staff transitions need to take these technology skills/ saavy into account as well.

Put a big emphasis on trying to connect with those who are in your building. I’d have some kind of “Welcome to Riverside” wall-rack or display in every room in use by auxillary groups. Include a short informational brochure about who you are and what you offer. I’d try to get someone from Riverside into these various groups periodically to say “hello,” “welcome,” and “If you’re looking for a church, we’d love to have you check us out.” When you have a program like OWL that non-Riverside families are part of, welcome them with a letter and invitation.

Program with who you are trying to reach in mind. For example, have things for people who are new to Hood River to meet others like themselves, newcomers or people who have come in the last 5 years and have learned some things.

Have other things for young couples and single parents with children. Offer child-care while people in this age/ stage are helped to get to know one another and have some fun together.

You could also have a group or evening for former Roman Catholics, including some already with you but reaching out to ex-Catholics who are looking. You have to be a little careful in putting his out there, maybe build a conversation around the UCC publication mentioned above.

Another option you might consider is offering a basic “Faith Exploration for Seekers and Searchers,” that is small-group based and is guided by the questions the seekers are asking. Involve some of your seasoned members and mature people of faith in these groups — it doesn’t all have to be on the pastor. A growing number of young people have no church-background and coming to it with very basic questions. Honor that, welcome it. If you want to go more into this, I can recommend some resources.

Another way to put this is to say that *if most or all of your programming is targeted to the existing (heavily Boomer) membership, you are unlikely to grow*. Try to develop what I called above an *“outward-orientation,”* which means not only a concern for the most vulnerable in your community (which you have) but a real heart for newcomers, seekers, questers, “lurkers” and “lookers.” Make an outward-orientation toward these folks a big, big priority for the whole church. One of the big changes in Hood River and the Gorge is that there is a lot of churn and less stability. A lot of people are looking for ways to connect that don’t involve having been part of the community since 1890.

To pull this off, you probably need some additional staff whose priority lies in these communication and program areas. I don’t think that is an Associate Minister (too expensive), but more like a gifted lay person who is really good at connecting and helping others do so, has organizational as well as people skills, and who has a feel for younger generations. And if you do move in these program and staffing directions, give it time, like three to five years. Don’t expect overnight results (but do expect some results).

3. Build and strengthen your financial base and resources. Insiders probably have a sense that there’s not much more blood to be squeezed from this turnip. I would question that. But let’s step back and look at this a little more comprehensively.

As I remarked in the after-church session on Nov. 10, think of church finances as a three-legged stool made up of 1) annual giving, which people tend to do from their annual income, 2) Endowment giving, which people tend to do from accumulated assets and estate plans, and 3) Capital Fund drives, which taps a combination of annual income and accumulated assets.

1. Starting with annual giving and pledge/ plate income. I recommend you give serious attention to offering people a goal or guideline for their giving, that is not keyed to incremental changes in the budget.

Encourage proportionate giving. Consider the so-called “modern tithe” of 5% to God’s work through my church and 5% to God’s work through other programs and causes. 5% has the advantage of being quite easy for ordinary people to figure. It is $1.00 per week for $1,000 of annual income. So if my income is $90,000, my pledge would be $90 a week to my church.

Currently, your average pledge is $2,185. If that is 5% giving that means the average income in your congregation is $42,000. While that may what it is for some, and for some lower than that, I expect average income in your congregation is significantly higher than $42,000. My hunch would be that current giving is about 2%.(There are a handful of givers at a higher level, probably closer to 5% or more). But I think you have room to grow here. You have 54 (out of 78) pledging units between $500 and $2000. There’s probably a lot of potential there for increased giving.

If you do adopt the 5% figure, treat it as a guideline toward which people are invited to work gradually. I can speak with you more about this if you wish, or you could get a team to read my little book, *Stewardship for Vital Congregations* available from Pilgrim Press.

2. Moving to your Endowment. You really need to prioritize this, given the age of many of your members. The point is not simply to increase church funds (which I am for), it is also to talk with your members about the *stewardship of their assets* and how they want the use of their estate to reflect their values and priorities.

Here’s a simple way to get going. Put a check-off box at the bottom on your Pledge Card that reads, “I have included Riverside Church in my will/ estate plan.” Track those who check the box and consider having a dinner and entertainment event once a year to recognize and thank them. Highlight this form of stewardship with a profile of a past or future giver to the Endowment in your newsletter.

Sometimes people have the idea in churches that “An Endowment will kill the church,” because the living will stop giving. That only happens when the church has no lively sense of mission. If you are trying to make a difference in the world you need all three of the legs of the stool to be strong.

You Endowment is presently something over $500,000 — but with little or no recent growth. It is reasonable to think your Endowment could grow to one milion in the next ten years by making it visible and a priority. Also, encourage people to give to the Endowment without strings-attached or for special designated purposes. Discourage earkmarked giving. That gets way too complicated to manage and may render Endowment funds inaccessible.

3. Periodic Capital Drives (that is building and other fixed assets). You’ve had a couple small drives recently, but no major one. Of course, you don’t do this unless there is a legitimate need. But keeping up and even enhancing your building may present such a need.

This kind of giving, “The Campaign for Riverside” is one where you can reach beyond your membership to the community that values your presence (“If I went to church, I’d go to your church”) and to users of your facilities.

Often when a congregation does a significant Capital Drive it will retain services of a fund-raising consultant. If they are good at what they do they will not only help you meet a capital goal, but vivify stewardship overall.

Final word, on this recommendation. While we do want to have adequate funds for your church’s ministry and mission, our deepest goal is to grow generous people. How we use our money, deal with our fears about money, and develop the practices of generosity and whole-life stewardship is a spiritual matter. “Where your treasure is,” said Jesus, “there also is your heart.”

**In Conclusion**

So, those are my big three recommendations, all of which fall under the rubric of “Develop an Outward Orientation.” This does not mean, “You don’t care about our members, you only care about new people.” You will continue to serve your existing members, and you also ask them to join you, pastor and lay leaders, in becoming a community that helps people come to faith and to discover a church home of their own. What could be more important in today’s world? In review,

1. Think and pray about who you’re trying to reach. Ask God to send you those — whoever they may be — who are seeking Him/ Her, and who need/ long for a church home.

2. Upgrade communications and reshape program around who you are trying to reach.

3. Strengthen your financial resources to support this shift.

Another major recommendation (#4) is to begin to think about and prepare for staff transitions over the next five years. How you go about that is a little unclear because you don’t know exactly when/ what those transitions might be. But still, I’d begin now to think about Transition planning for several of your key staff positions.

And in the meantime, consider adding a part-time person to focus on outreach/ communication and newcomer participation.

Your church has so much to offer. There are people out there longing for what you are and what you offer. Work on developing an outward orientation that includes, not only the most vulnerable, but people who are seeking faith, God, hope, love and a church home that makes a difference in the world.

I hold you in my prayers and send my wishes for grace, peace and courage for the living of these days.