

# Input Project

Report to Covenant Council

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## **INPUT PROJECT SUMMARY**

The Input Project was a series of 39 small group listening sessions held at St. Mark's United Methodist Church on January 18 and January 26 through February 1, 2020. The purpose of the Project was to give people an opportunity to express their views and listen to others regarding LGBTQ+ matters and the church.

### **Introduction**

#### **History**

After the United Methodist Church's Special General Conference Session in February 2019, many people had questions and concerns about the legislation adopted there and its implications. In July 2019, St. Mark's held two information sessions at Wednesday night Soul Station about the Desert Southwest Conference's Way Forward Teams. After those sessions it was clear that a forum for people to express their views and hear those of others was needed. From July through November 2019, Rev. Sharon Ragland invited Dick Williams, Susan Gerstad, and Brenda Hunter to form a leadership team to design and implement the Input Project. Margaret Synhorst was invited to join the group in November. This group met and had long discussions about the design and implementation of the Project including purpose, overall process, timing, questions, publicity, registration, training of small group leaders and much more. Approval to proceed was given by our church's Covenant Council. In early January 2020, a mailing was sent to the entire congregation inviting them to participate in listening sessions. The sessions were held from 1/18-2/1/20. The Leadership Team continued to meet throughout the process and after the sessions. This is a summary report from the Leadership Team.

#### **Purpose**

There were three purposes in conducting this exercise:

- 1) The overarching purpose of the Input Project was to give people an opportunity to express their views and listen to others regarding LGBTQ+ matters and the church.
- 2) It was expected this project would provide direction for future needs on these matters such as classes and/or additional listening sessions.
- 3) It was expected this project would provide input to St. Mark's Covenant Council for potential decisions to be made in the future regarding St. Mark's and LGBTQ+ matters.

#### **Design**

Thirty-nine small group listening sessions were held with 299 participants. Each group was led by a shepherd and a scribe. Twenty-three people were trained in two training sessions to be shepherds and scribes. A closely followed script was used for each session which included prayer, introductions, reading and agreeing to a covenant, answering six questions in writing and then sharing about those questions. Participants were asked to turn in their written

questions. No one had to share verbally or turn in their questions, although they were encouraged to do so.

The participants in the Input Project listening sessions were asked the following six questions:

- 1) What do you believe is the purpose of the Church?
- 2) How do you see St. Mark's living out this purpose?
- 3) What, if any, are your concerns about how the global United Methodist Church is acting towards persons who identify as LGBTQ+?
- 4) What, if any, concerns do you have regarding persons openly identifying as LGBTQ+ serving in a leadership position at St. Mark's UMC?
- 5) What, if any, concerns do you have regarding St. Mark's UMC pastors conducting same gender marriages?  
officiating at baptisms for LGBTQ+ individuals or their children?
- 6) What do you want the leadership of St. Mark's UMC to know today?

Our summary of the responses to the questions begins below. It is important to note that while we had an excellent response from the congregation, it was not a random selection so we CANNOT make numerical conclusions about how many in the congregation think this or feel that. However, because the number of participants was large, we do think that we have a representative sample of the range of thoughts and feelings held by the members of our congregation. As might be expected, the range of thoughts reflects the thoughts within the global UMC.

## Results

### **1. What do you believe is the purpose of the Church?**

Of the people who participated, the overwhelming response was that the purpose of the Church is to show God's love and light to all, which includes spreading the Gospel, learning to be like Jesus and serving others. Other frequent answers included that the Church should be welcoming to all, which would include providing opportunity to worship, build community and foster a loving church family. The Church should also offer opportunities to worship and glorify God so that we learn about Him and learn to love Him, and receive the salvation offered through Jesus Christ.

### **2. How do you see St. Mark's living out this purpose?**

The participants interpreted this question in two ways.

Of the people who participated, many answered it by describing the ways that St. Mark's lives out its purpose. For example, participants said that we practice being inclusive and accepting. We worship in a variety of ways, including the (formal) worship at the Magee and La Canada campus as well as at Dove Mountain. St. Mark's does an excellent job of reaching out to the

community, with support from church members. St. Mark's is involved locally, nationally and internationally in mission activities. An effective pastoral staff supports this work through compelling sermons. Additional spiritual growth opportunities for all ages are offered. Many people shared the belief that St. Mark's reflects "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors" and lives well into our mission statement, "Changing the world through Christ by caring for all people."

Other people who participated interpreted the question as an opportunity to evaluate how well we live out the purpose. Most of those who saw this as an evaluative question expressed their opinion that St. Mark's is doing an excellent job. A few others expressed concern. For example, the pastors carry out the purpose well, but the congregational response is weaker. Others wondered about how inclusive we really are, pointing out that we have very few people of color worshipping with us. One last concern expressed by a couple of participants was that that we are straying away from true Christian beliefs.

### **3. What, if any, are your concerns about how the global United Methodist Church is acting towards persons who identify as LGBTQ+?**

Of those that participated, the great majority of participants indicated that they were concerned that LGBTQ+ persons were being excluded from full participation in the life of the church. Several mentioned that Jesus included everyone or that all people are beloved children of God. Some referenced "Open Hearts, Open Minds, Open Doors," and said that excluding anyone is counter to that statement. Some also expressed concern that the global Church's decision is causing pain and causing many to feel unwelcome. A few people expressed concern that the issue was polarizing and divisive, and others wonder why this is still an issue on which there is so much focus.

A very few felt that those who valued the word of God and wanted to follow the current Book of Discipline were being pushed out. A concern expressed within this group was a feeling that the Church is bending to social standards.

A few expressed no concerns and agreed with the current situation: that LGBTQ+ persons can participate in the worship activities and some service activities of the church, but should not be ordained or have marriage ceremonies within the church. A very few others thought that people identifying as LGBTQ+ persons should not be allowed to worship until they repent.

A few participants indicated that they did not understand what was happening at the global church. Some of these people wanted to have more information.

**4. What, if any, concerns do you have regarding persons openly identifying as LGBTQ+ serving in a leadership position at St. Mark's UMC?**

The people who participated in the Input Project continued to share a range of answers. Of those who participated, the overwhelming response indicated no concerns at all. Some participants elaborated on their answers, adding comments like if people have been given gifts and talents by God, they should be allowed to use them in service to God. Some who replied that they had no problems with LGBTQ+ persons serving in a leadership role indicated that those in leadership positions should be qualified, have the same leadership skills as those of heterosexuals, follow Jesus, and be a good Christian person. It was important that all who have a call to serve as a pastor go through the same discernment process. Others welcomed the idea of LGBTQ+ people serving in leadership positions because it might be a way to reach out to marginalized people. It was pointed out that positions have probably already been filled by members of the LGBTQ+ community. While most participants did indicate that LGBTQ+ serving would be acceptable to them, some participants were concerned that people would not treat LGBTQ+ leaders with respect. These participants also said they did not want LGBTQ+ leaders to be hurt and were concerned about the church dividing. There was also an acknowledgement that some people would leave St. Mark's if we have LGBTQ+ persons in leadership.

A few participants felt LGBTQ+ persons could serve in leadership positions, with certain limitations. These limits include serving as long as they did not teach or lead children or youth. They should not promote an LGBTQ+ lifestyle or agenda. A couple of participants suggested that it would be best to keep their sexual orientation to themselves. Finally, a very few people felt they should not serve as leaders because it is contrary to the Bible and our Book of Discipline.

**5. What, if any, concerns do you have regarding St. Mark's UMC pastors conducting same gender marriages?**

The great majority of those who participated in the Input Project had no concerns, with some going so far as to indicate they wish it was already happening. Some who had no concerns about conducting same gender marriages at St. Mark's did express concern about pastors getting punished or receiving backlash for performing same gender marriages. A very few people, while stating that same gender marriage ceremonies would be acceptable, did express concern that this would be a reason for people to leave St. Mark's.

A few participants indicated that they were still struggling with the question. While they tended to feel uncomfortable with the idea of same gender marriages, they were listening.

Finally, several who participated in the Input Project expressed the belief that marriage or Holy Matrimony is to be between a man and a woman. A few elaborated by saying that officiating at same gender marriages was contrary to Biblical teaching.

## **officiating at baptisms for LGBTQ+ individuals or their children?**

Of those who participated, the great majority felt that baptism of LGBTQ+ persons and their children was acceptable, and that baptism should be open to all. Even some who felt that marriage was unacceptable felt that anyone who desired to follow Jesus and be baptized should be able to be baptized. A few people thought children of LGBTQ+ persons should be baptized because it is not their fault that their parents are not heterosexual.

A few participants felt that baptism of both LGBTQ+ adults and their children could not be supported.

### **6. What do you want the leadership of St. Mark's UMC to know today?**

We intend to share all the answers to this question with the leadership of St. Mark's. Many people took this opportunity to express deeply held views and concerns. There were several themes that could be identified.

Importance of inclusion – Participants indicated that they want worship at St. Mark's to be open to everyone. However, there was variability to the extent that St. Mark's should be inclusive. Some who want complete inclusion indicated that they would leave the church if changes were not made. Others, while being welcoming in worship, were concerned about including LGBTQ+ people in leadership positions.

Gratitude - Participants expressed gratitude for being asked their opinions and for being able to hear other people's opinions. Some indicated that if a decision needs to be made at some point, they hope the leadership would include the opinions of St. Mark's congregation during the decision-making process.

Support of pastors and leadership – Participants expressed their deep support for our pastors (especially) and leadership, and their courage during this difficult time.

Longing for closure – Many people expressed concern about the toll this is taking on our church and the whole UMC and long for these matters to be settled.

Future of the church- Many are concerned about the church splitting but feel that this might be necessary if we cannot agree on the extent of inclusion of LGBTQ+ people.

Live into our promise and mission statement- We have "Open Minds, Open Hearts, Open Doors" on the side of our building. Participants were concerned that we keep that promise, as well as fulfilling our mission statement of Changing the world through Christ by caring for all people.

## **Conclusions**

Virtually everyone who participated in the Input Project expressed a deep love of St. Mark's and want us to continue our work within our walls and in the community.

We want to reiterate the overarching purpose of the Input Project, which was to give people an opportunity to express their views and listen to others regarding LGBTQ+ matters and the

church. With responses from almost 300 people out of a worshipping population of greater than 1000 people (both members and others), we think we have heard the complete range of answers to our questions.

Another purpose was to provide direction for future needs on these matters such as classes or additional listening sessions. We heard a need for more information, and Adult Spiritual Growth, Church and Society and The Rainbow Fellowship have already organized two workshops called Learn, Love and Grow Together to continue this discussion.

Our final purpose was to provide input to St. Mark's Covenant Council for potential decisions to be made in the future regarding St. Mark's and LGBTQ+ matters. We want to be clear that the results from this exercise do not represent a vote or guide us to any particular decision, but do inform us about the concerns, thoughts and feelings our congregation has. We also developed a format that could be used as the basis for future discussions on emotional and controversial topics.