



Executive Summary Report to Plymouth United Church of Christ

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Executive Summary

Overview

In June 2013, Plymouth United Church of Christ (Plymouth) retained Collins Group (Collins) to conduct a feasibility study for a \$2.5 million capital campaign to fund improvements to the church sanctuary. Set in motion by the gift of a new organ, scheduled to arrive in 2014, the proposed sanctuary improvements project was designed to improve the worship experience and provide greater flexibility for both worship and non-worship events.

During the four-month study process, Collins evaluated Plymouth's readiness against six elements key to the success of major fundraising initiatives: organizational strength, case for support, leadership, giving potential, internal readiness, and climate and timing. Through 30 interviews, a Congressional Council focus group, and an online survey of members and friends of Plymouth, Collins collected community opinions from 198 constituents regarding the overall vision, community benefit, and financial feasibility of the proposed project.

Summary of Findings and Analysis

Organizational Strength

Study participants clearly view Plymouth as *the* progressive Christian voice for social justice in downtown Seattle. Other points of distinction include:

- Programs for youth and young adults
- Plymouth's endowment and the stability it provides
- Quality of the music program
- Plymouth's history as an "open and affirming" congregation

Concerns expressed by study participants include:

- An aging and dwindling membership
- Lack of diverse musical offerings
- Limited adult programs in faith and spiritual development
- A cumbersome congregational decision-making process
- Endowment used as a "crutch" to balance operating budget

Concerns about Plymouth's future and its membership numbers in particular colored study participants' perception of the sanctuary renovation plans. Those participants most in favor of the project saw it as a way to help attract new members.



Case for Support

Study participants were asked to respond to a case for support that outlined the costs and benefits of a \$2.5 million campaign to renovate the church's sanctuary.

Most felt the improvements were not integral to furthering Plymouth's mission and the return on a \$2.5 million investment was not evident. Those who felt a sense of urgency to move forward connected it to the procurement of the new Fisk organ, slated for arrival and installation in the spring of 2014.

Of the five "benefits" listed as outcomes of the project, two clearly emerged as top priorities of study participants:

- Creating a welcoming space for worship
- Improving sound quality

The lowest priority was improving spatial drama (although many were supportive of some level of lighting improvements).

When asked if there were other priorities that Plymouth should be pursuing instead of the ones outlined in the case statement, a majority replied in the affirmative. Some of the most prevalent priorities included:

- Increasing outreach efforts to attract new members
- Streamlining internal decision-making
- Improving the church's entrance
- Bringing Hildebrand Hall to its highest and best use

Analysis of these findings points to a desire expressed by study participants that any renovation to the sanctuary be in service of a concerted effort to make Plymouth more attractive to new members. Study participants also viewed "outreach" as going beyond the church's facilities, to include efforts by congregants and strategies by church leadership to strengthen the membership rolls.

Leadership

Study participants generally felt positive about the church's professional and volunteer leadership. Senior Minister Brigitta Remole was rated as "effective" or "very effective" by most study participants. A desire was expressed by several interviewees that she be more active in the community and in building new membership.

Study participants also expresses support for the Congregational Council and gave strong support to Catie Wilson and Tom Maul, co-chairs of the Study Advisory Committee, who also stepped forward to serve as campaign co-chairs in the event a campaign moves forward. Few who participated in the study agreed to consider a volunteer role in the campaign.

Collins is confident that with sufficient cultivation and personal recruitment by Tom Maul, Catie Wilson, and Brigitta Remole this hurdle can be overcome and a core of volunteer leaders can be assembled to lead a campaign.



Giving Potential

Study participants were shown a gift chart that demonstrated the size and number of gifts needed to reach a \$2.5 million campaign goal. It included a keystone gift at \$500,000 and 15 lead gifts in the \$50,000 to \$250,000 range. They were asked to assess the feasibility of Plymouth securing the gifts needed for a successful campaign and their own potential level of support.

Most study participants did not feel that a \$2.5 million campaign was feasible or even appropriate in light of other priorities they identified for Plymouth.

When asked to suggest a high and low range for a gift they might consider, to be paid over a three-year pledge period, study participants identified a cumulative range of \$781,000 to \$1.72 million. A significant majority of interviewees said they would make their campaign gifts in addition to their annual gifts.

Plymouth is the top charity or among the top charities that study participants support. However, the campaign as presented was not considered a high charitable priority. This is a significant finding and shows a strong disconnect between study participants' support of Plymouth overall and their potential support for the campaign as presented.

Internal Readiness

An in-depth internal readiness analysis was not included in Collins' scope of work for this study. Study manager James Plourde conducted a lengthy interview with Stewardship Chair Jon Palmason to gain some insight into the church's development infrastructure.

Based on that conversation and on questions asked in the study, we determined that a campaign could be structured that would not interfere with the annual stewardship drive. With some high-capacity households, asking for annual and campaign gifts at the same time will be appropriate. Congregants overall expressed an understanding that responding to annual and occasional campaigns to fund capital needs is part of being members of a faith community like Plymouth.

Additional staffing may be needed during the campaign period, both to keep it on track and to ensure that Brigitta's time is used strategically and effectively. People understand the need for her involvement in a campaign but also do not want to see her taken away from her primary duty as spiritual leader of the congregation.



Climate and Timing

We found no significant roadblocks indicating the need to hold off on a campaign effort either because of economic concerns or the timing of competing campaigns. Study participants felt that the economy was either a positive factor or would have no impact on a campaign effort. The only other potentially competing campaign mentioned was for Plymouth Housing, the timing of which should be investigated more thoroughly to ensure it does not conflict with a Plymouth UCC effort.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary

Based on the findings of the study, Collins concludes that Plymouth is well positioned to launch a successful campaign if it revises the scope of the project to be more in line with the wishes expressed by study participants and reduces the campaign goal to \$1.25 million. The campaign's success will depend on its ability to attract leadership and define a scope that addresses the congregation's concerns about building up membership. We further recommend that Plymouth consider appointing a task force to study the membership situation, both at Plymouth and at similar faith communities, and make recommendations for how the entire congregation can work together to improve the issue in a holistic manner.

Campaign Timing

Phase I: Campaign Advancement, mid-September to mid-November 2013

- Revise campaign scope and goal
- Update case for support and key messages
- Recruit campaign leadership
- Secure two to five top gift commitments, contingent on a successful congregational vote
- Prepare for November congregational vote

Phase II: Lead Gifts, mid-November 2013 to January 2014 (assuming a positive congregational vote)

- Secure gifts from lead donors and members of Congregational Council
- Develop list of major donor prospects
- Schedule monthly campaign leadership meetings

Phase III: Congregational Campaign, January to June 2014

- Actively solicit Plymouth membership for campaign gifts
- Secure 100 percent of campaign goal
- Celebrate success



Immediate Action Steps

- Sanctuary Improvement Committee and Congregational Council determine appropriate scope and goal of project
- Share study results and next steps with congregation
- Appoint task force to create membership development plan
- Recruit campaign committee
- Prepare to hire campaign assistant
- Assess need for campaign counsel

Closing

We have enjoyed our association with Plymouth during the past four months. We encourage you to move forward with the advancement work necessary for a successful capital campaign and look forward to additional opportunities to provide service.

Collins Group
September 27, 2013