

Transition Team Executive Summary
Messiah Lutheran Church
June 3, 2022

A. Committee Members

Chair: Joe Roman

Staff: Pr. Jerome Burce, Pr. Seth Bridger, Helen Casselberry, Lisa Daley, Janelle Stamper, Danielle Waugaman, Darlene Waugh

Members: Mike Allan, Wendy Ling, Jay Machado, Sharon Ratvasky, Michael Waugh

B. Synopsis

The Messiah Transition Team was recommended by Pr. Burce and approved by the Messiah Church Council upon the announcement of his retirement, which is scheduled for July 31, 2022. The purpose of the committee was to plan for the future of Messiah Lutheran Church and specifically, what the future of the church might look like after the retirement of the longest tenured pastor in the history of the congregation. At the same time, the church has changed dramatically in recent years, accelerated by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Transition Team's methodology was to engage the congregation in two meaningful ways. First, a congregational survey was conducted in the fall of 2021 which requested feedback in the following areas: overall church experience, impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, mission, and future vision. The survey responses are confidential. Secondly, the transition team conducted a number of focus groups ranging from a small group format to individual conversations with prominent and faithful members of Messiah. Focus groups were coordinated with two transition team members attending each focus group session and the notes from those interviews are confidential.

The initial transition team meeting occurred with the newly elected bishop of the Northeast Ohio Synod, Pr. Laura Barbins, in the fall. During that meeting, the call process was discussed with the bishop, as well as the intentions of Messiah to designate a transition team as a precursor to the call committee. The bishop stated this process would be acceptable and also stressed the importance of celebrating the remaining time in which Pr. Burce would still be serving as pastor at Messiah.

A presentation was made to the Church Council on May 19, 2022 and after receiving the recommendations from the Transition Team, the Church Council requested a formal executive summary, for which this report will suffice. Finally, the transition team will conclude its work with the submission of this report at which point in time, the Church Council will determine next steps.

C. Congregational Survey Questions

Pandemic Questions

1. In the year before the pandemic (2019), how often were you attending Messiah worship services or other events (non-school related)?
2. Since the pandemic started, have you participated in services remotely via online, livestream, or Facebook?
3. Right now, where are you regarding in-person worship attendance?
4. Generally, how do you feel Messiah has addressed the challenges of the pandemic?

Questions about Messiah Church (current perceptions & future challenges) - Rated questions 1 (Disagree Strongly) to 5 (Agree Strongly)

1. Messiah Church is a good steward of my financial support and utilizes my donations wisely.
2. It is important for Messiah to maintain its Lutheran identity.
3. Messiah's worship services generally meet my expectations.
4. Messiah helps me grow in my Christian faith and put it to use.
5. I would invite a friend to experience Messiah Church services.
6. Messiah plays a strong role in the local community.
7. I feel comfortable coming to Messiah for help beyond normal church activities.
Examples: counseling after a loss, financial help, guidance for other community services in town, etc.
8. I feel an emotional connection to the future of Messiah Church.
9. Based on my current experiences, I am confident in Messiah's long-term future and viability as a congregation.
10. Messiah Lutheran School is a necessary asset for the future of Messiah Lutheran Church.
11. The current environment for church in America will require future changes at Messiah of some sort to stay healthy.
12. Messiah Church is rooted in the teaching and preaching of the Gospel.
13. The music ministry at Messiah Church enhances my worship experience.
14. The facilities at Messiah Church provide ample space for worship, ministry, and fellowship.
15. In a time of personal or family crisis, I am confident Messiah Church would respond with prayer, genuine care, compassion, and support.
16. The future vision of Messiah Church is clearly communicated to church members.
17. I am made aware of volunteer opportunities at Messiah Church as they become available.

Long Answer Questions

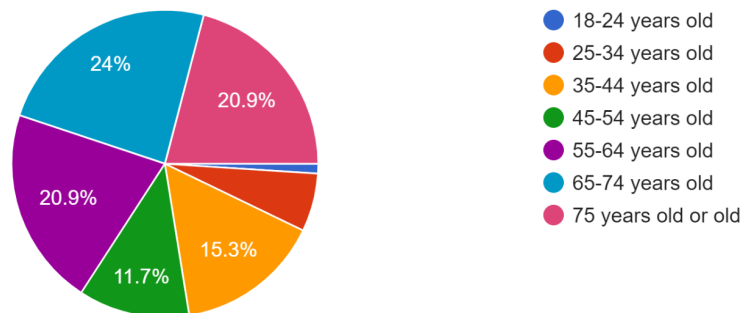
1. Identify the strengths of Messiah Church.
2. Identify the weaknesses of Messiah Church.
3. What has improved at Messiah Church during the time you have been attending?
4. What has changed for the worse at Messiah Church during the time you have been attending?

5. If you have previously or currently hold a leadership position (church council, school board, etc) at Messiah Church, what is one significant change you would pursue for the good of Messiah's future?
6. What one thing or attribute about Messiah Church do you hope never changes?
7. In ten years or so, what do you hope Messiah will look like?
8. How important is the school component of Messiah in relation to your overall feelings about Messiah Church.
9. Please tell us anything else you want us to know that the survey did not address.

Select Responses from the Congregational Survey:

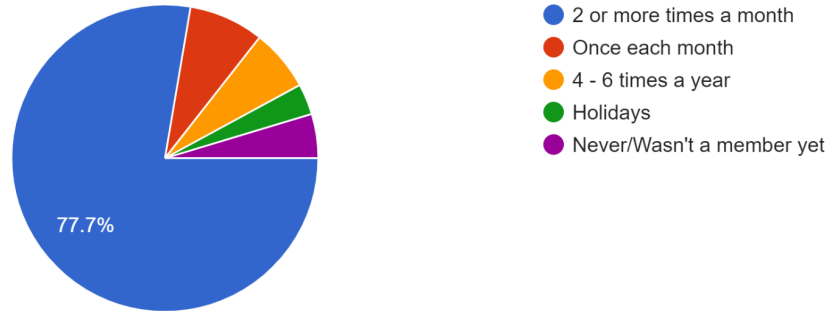
Age

196 responses



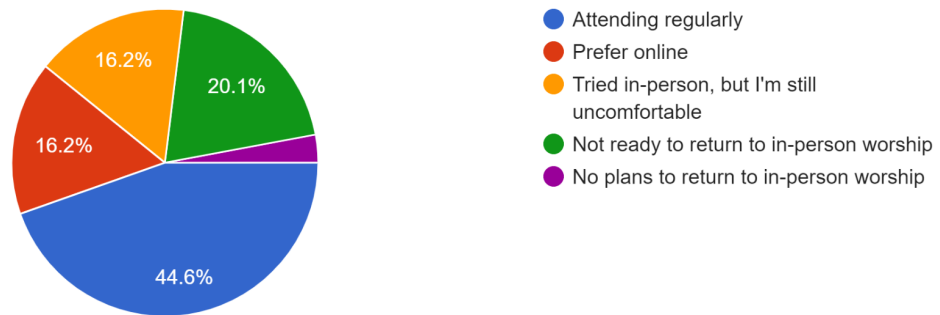
In the year before the pandemic (2019), how often were you attending Messiah worship services or other events (non-school related)?

215 responses



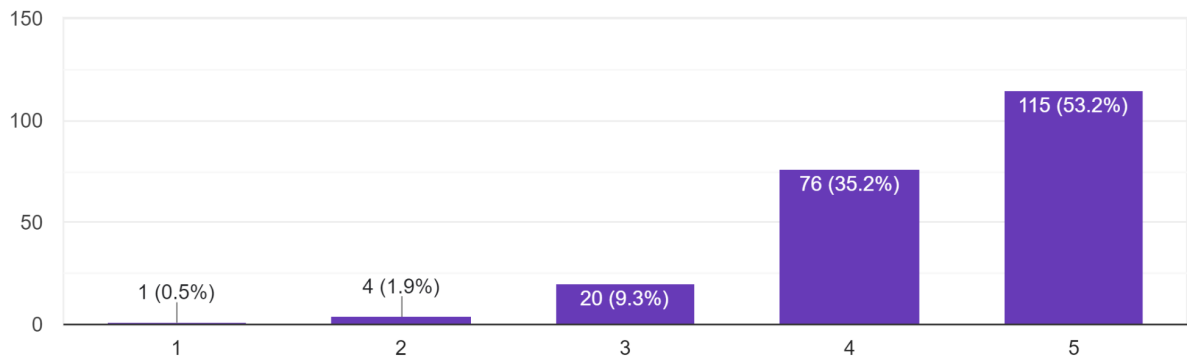
Right now, where are you regarding in-person worship attendance?

204 responses



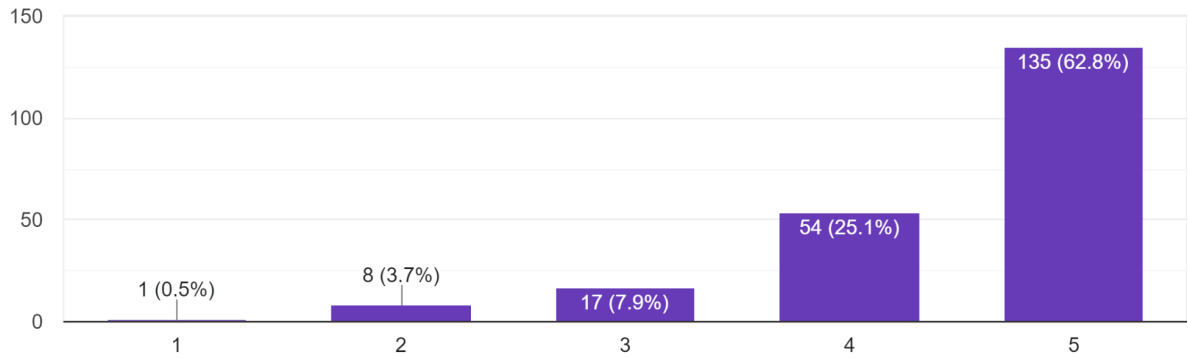
Messiah's worship services generally meet my expectations.

216 responses



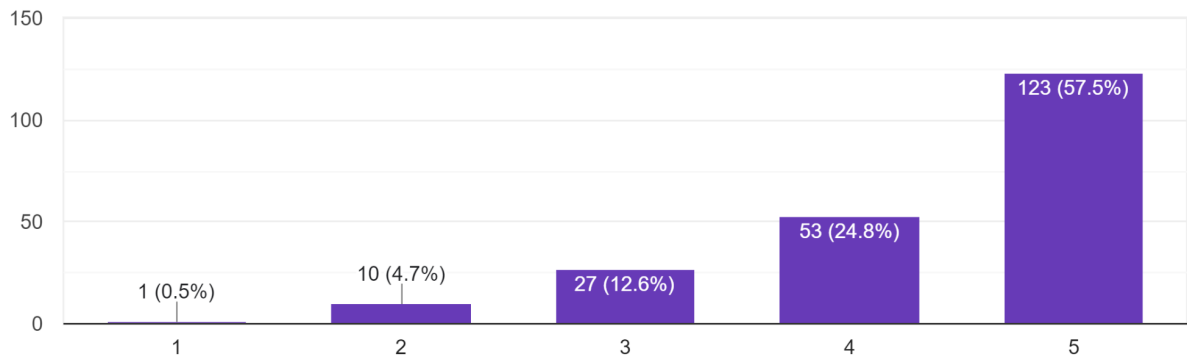
I feel an emotional connection to the future of Messiah Church.

215 responses



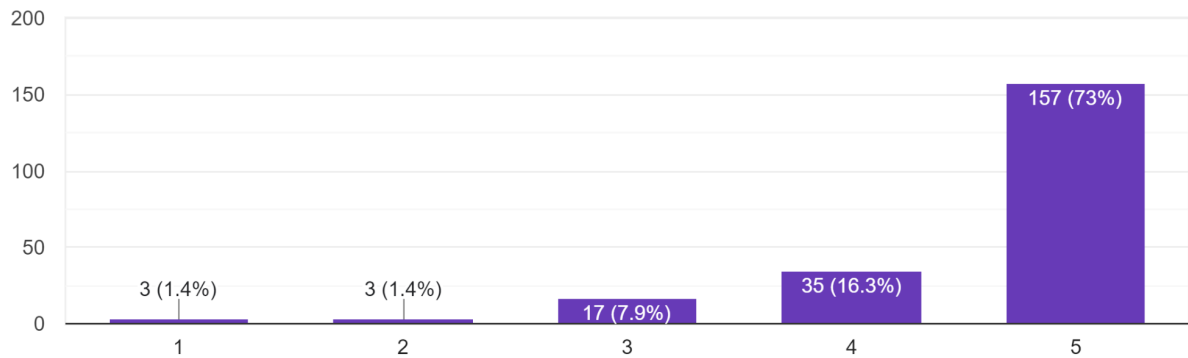
Based on my current experiences, I am confident in Messiah's long-term future and viability as a congregation.

214 responses



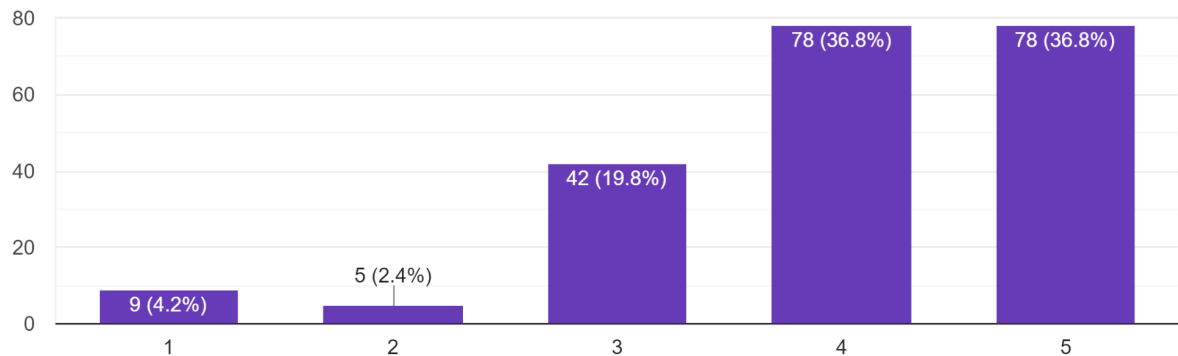
Messiah Lutheran School is a necessary asset for the future of Messiah Lutheran Church.

215 responses



The current environment for church in America will require future changes at Messiah of some sort to stay healthy.

212 responses



D. Key Differentiators

Members of Messiah generally have warm and positive feelings about the church as a whole. Many members describe Messiah as their spiritual “home” and are incredibly thankful for the ministry team. Members would say that Messiah has a strong tradition of great preaching, a caring heart, and a ministry that is deeply rooted in the Gospel.

During the pandemic, the congregation is incredibly thankful for the streaming of services and believes it has been done at a high level. While many churches struggled at the beginning of the pandemic to get their services online, Messiah was a leader in this area. Further, the quality of the broadcast has continued to attract members to view the services online post pandemic.

The ministry aspects of Messiah's outreach are perceived to be a greater strength today than they were 10 years ago. Two specific ministries which engage the community are the Pierstorf College Fund and Laundry Love.

Additionally, there is also a sense of comfort among many members of the congregation that Pastor Bridger is remaining on the pastoral staff after the retirement of Pastor Burce.

Select Quotes from Focus Groups:

1. "I never felt really at home at a church until I attended Messiah."
2. "I was raised Catholic and everyone made me feel comfortable and both pastors are very accessible and approachable - I couldn't see myself going to another church."
3. "I was born into the congregation and it just became a part of me - I went to another place for a time and Messiah is 'home.'"
4. "The school is a strength of the church because it focuses the congregation on the future and the way it should go."
5. "The staff here is so impressive and I'm impressed with the quality - not a lot of turnover and it speaks to the strength of the staff."
6. "The preaching is definitely a strong point - it's the only place I have gone that I actually listen to the sermons - the next person needs to get our attention."
7. "[The facility is a] really a nice place and there is a lot that can be done here - it took a lot of vision to put this together with regards to the artwork and symbology."
8. "The Laundry Love ministry is incredibly impactful and it is beyond financial [assistance]. It gives people their dignity; it's multi-dimensional - some families, some people who just require fellowship; could other churches also partner with Messiah to share the load."
9. "Being a faithful teacher of the Gospel is the key to being successful and having a worthwhile program."
10. "Our history is strong and we are a pillar of Lutheran worship in Cleveland. The finances are built for the long haul and the members are faithfully supporting the work."

E. Key Concerns

Concerns expressed by the congregation generally fall into three categories:

1. Ensuring the next pastor is an excellent preacher
2. Improving the communication and connection between the church and school
3. Creating a future vision (strategic plan) for the congregation as a whole

Additionally, while it was noted previously that the staff is a strength regarding the functionality of the church, other transitions were identified throughout the transition process. Specifically, two other key staff members are nearing retirement. While the church is already facing a

transitional period after the retirement of Pr. Burce, this transitional period will inevitably extend beyond his retirement as the church staff faces more turnover in the coming years. Recently, a number of part-time staff members have been added to support the overall congregation (e.g. facilities coordinator, technology coordinator), but those part-time staff positions can prove difficult to create efficiencies organizationally due to the time constraints that inevitably arise with part-time employees.

Finally, church attendance data is listed below as an area of concern given the downward trend in church attendance from 2007-2021, a 15-year period:

Calendar Year	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Avg, Attendance	541	555	545	513	492	475
New Members (-baptized)	62	68	64	39	25	40
Baptisms	22	23	17	13	15	11
First Communion	30	28		27	15	26
Confirmations	17	27	20	28	23	23
Enrolled Members	1777	1813	1848	1867	1867	1885
Active Members (appx.)	1401	1472	1313	1284	1239	1185

Calendar Year	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Avg, Attendance	437	445	396	381	350
New Members (-baptized)	32	26	34	27	26
Baptisms	21	12	12	19	20
First Communion	17	17	8	13	11
Confirmations	24	19	13	22	15
Enrolled Members	1892	1815	1807	1813	1718
Active Members (appx.)	1100	1096	1107	1095	1003

Calendar Year	2018	2019	2020	2021
			Covid	Covid
Avg, Attendance	347	343	297	239
New Members (-baptized)	26	28	18	10
Baptisms	8	26	5	24
First Communion	9	7	11	2
Confirmations	16	3	7	14
Enrolled Members	1713	1452	1458	1440
Active Members (appx.)	957	960	1062	924

Select Quotes from Focus Groups:

1. "For people beyond the school and youth group a lot of people feel out of the loop - this is especially true for people in the 50+ group."
2. "I don't even know how many students are in the school."
3. "I would like to know if the minutes of Church Council could be read by the congregation."
4. "There is room for improvement in communication and that takes work and a staff dedicated to that communication."
5. "The Sunday school was ok pre-pandemic but in the next five years the next person really needs to ramp up the program."
6. "I did youth ministry for 10 years and we need to help children discover their own faith and show the youth how to lead themselves and to become their own community and not just their parent's community."
7. "I would hope that we continue to have two pastors. We can afford it and I think we should make that investment. There is certainly enough work for two pastors."
8. "Get someone dynamic and who has charisma - someone who really can captivate you with a sermon."
9. "[We need to] create a climate of inviting a person into church."
10. "We can change the liturgy from week to week - they are written by experts and we should use them - I don't like ad libbing the liturgy."
11. "When the contemporary service was in the gym there seemed to be more energy - giving people more of an option for worship style."
12. "The aging congregation needs to be addressed - membership will be a challenge [in the future]."
13. "I don't think Messiah focuses enough on high school, college age, or younger families. I also think that we don't do enough to welcome new people and families."

14. "I think we need to get away from the idea that you are a member if you come every Sunday - maybe a challenge is to find activities that will attract young people and then consider that a part of membership."
15. "There aren't enough youth to pastor but that could be a self-fulfilling prophecy."

F. Recommendations

Recommendations from the Messiah Transition Team fit into three categories. These recommendations seek to address the key concerns while at the same time capitalizing on Messiah's key differentiators.

The first recommendation is that the Church Council should move quickly to begin the call process. The Call Committee, when formed, will be tasked to seek a new pastor with a set of skills commensurate with Messiah's needs. Those needs should center around the calling of a dynamic preacher and a person capable of crafting a future vision for Messiah Lutheran Church which centers around growth in youth programming and school support.

The second recommendation is to further invest in the day-to-day administration of the church office staff. The church office is blessed by long-tenured and capable hands. Simultaneously, the growth of the Pierstorf College Fund has also led to certain resource constraints that Messiah has not yet done enough to address. The feedback received spoke clearly to the day-to-day administration and outreach as an area worthy of further investment. To that end, the Administration and Finance Committee will consider how best to define the role of a new Business Operations Subcommittee to report to Church Council, composed of members with expertise in areas including business process, financial, legal and human resources. The church staff could potentially grow in size with a new model for leveraging all of these available resources.

The third recommendation would be to create a strategic plan which addresses the lack of future vision, ways to support the school's ministry through outreach, and ways to engage younger members - whether those be new members or the re-engagement of existing members. This strategic plan should be led by the new pastoral ministry team and not designed before the calling of a new pastor. A new pastor who is attracted to this type of ministry and challenge would be preferable.