



Denominational Listening Campaign around Transformational Mission

What is a Listening Campaign?

In fall 2015 - winter 2016, NEXT Church embarked on a denominational listening campaign. A listening campaign is a tool we've learned from community organizing (specifically the Industrial Areas Foundation). We invited and trained people who have been leaders within NEXT Church to host a listening session with church leaders around questions of "transformational mission." The sharing of stories and experiences gives space to hear together where God's Spirit is moving.

We convened 47 groups that involved 447 people.

Purpose of the Listening Campaign

1. To learn about how people are **experiencing mission** in local church settings.
2. To offer the church a **relational tool** that can be used for discernment.
3. To hear **themes** that can inform future directions for the Presbyterian Mission Agency and our national church structures.
4. **To connect local church leaders** more deeply across differences in theology or vision for polity.

Through this campaign, we focused on people's *lived experiences*. We believe taking time to build and deepen relationships is a critical practice in the church today. The relational fabric (our connectedness) is what will help us wade through the waters of cultural and denominational change.

What We Heard

- People shared exciting stories about transformational mission they/their congregations are engaged in. That is to be celebrated!
 - There seems to be an organic connection between missional engagement and congregational vitality.
 - Most of the mission described is happening at the congregational level, often with ecumenical or secular partnerships.
 - Mission is a place where people are eager to engage in church life.

- Thought about mission is fluid and changing. Participants noted a shift toward “being missional,” a desire to seek full dignity of all parties in mission relationships, and that the most transformational mission experiences blur the us/them mentality.
- People enjoy connecting with one another to share experiences or the practice of ministry. Sharing stories was a source of inspiration as people were encouraged by what their sister congregations are doing, made new points of connection around shared concerns, and got new ideas for mission connections in their own settings.
- There is open wondering about the purpose of denominational structures (presbytery, synod, General Assembly) in the church today.
 - With a few notable exceptions, there was little despair or frustration voiced about denominational structures, but denominational structures or programs were not viewed as “go-to” resources.
 - There is hunger for denominational discernment. Where are the spaces to work through foundational questions that are not about voting?
 - There is a desire to “flip the script.” We heard multiple sentiments like, “We need the denomination to stop inviting us in and start supporting us as we go out.”
 - People are very appreciative when denominational structures play one of the following roles
 - supporting -- usually financially
 - training -- educational resources or opportunities to increase capacity (community organizing, New Beginnings, and anti-racism training came up), or
 - connecting -- linking people with similar interests/passions/mission engagement to share ideas or join together.
- There is desire for a different denominational communication strategy around mission.
 - There is a sense that opportunities for connection in mission exist in the broader church but it is not clear how to find out about them or connect with them.
 - Others feel overwhelmed by the volume of mail/email from denominational sources and ignore it all.

Questions Going Forward

- What does denominational participation mean today?
- Where are the spaces to work through foundational questions that are not about voting? (Questions such as, what is mission? What is the role of the presbytery?)
- Is mission the threshold/entry space that worship was in previous era? If so, what resources exist (or need to be created) to help integrate education and spiritual development through mission, if that’s where people are engaging first?

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