

Ministry Reflections and Recommendations
Chapel in the Pines Presbyterian Church

Paul Nixon
The Epicenter Group
September 2021

During the weekend of September 10-12, we held our long-awaited ministry consultation onsite at CITP. It was such a joy to see the community, the church campus and to meet so many of the people who make up Chapel in the Pines. A local team organized my visit, helping to define the strategic questions that would guide our time. 101 persons had taken the Readiness 360 inventory prior to the consultation. Around 75 persons were involved in meetings with me during the weekend. In addition, Mary Donna --- gathered considerable data on the church weeks prior to my visit. And we utilized Mission Insite demographic information on the local population within a four-mile radius of CITP.

Over this weekend, three issues came up in conversations that I would like to address up front. From there, I will move to a section on live observations and reflections. Finally, I will offer ministry recommendations.

CRITICAL ISSUES

1. The anxiety that as the church grows, it will lose those characteristics that drew many members to embrace CITP.

It became clear to me as I read the results of the *Readiness 360* survey that quite a few folks are worried about the church growing too big, and thereby losing the intimacy of community that it offered in the early years. Some persons assumed that I was called in order to help the church grow. To this I replied, “*Growing numerically* was never mentioned as I was engaged for this work. *Making good next steps in the church’s development* is closer to how the challenge was stated to me.” The population around CITP is not just growing: it is exploding. And the worship attendance has been creeping up at CITP steadily in recent years. In short, CITP is already growing, and will likely continue to do so.

I think the critical question is this: “How, as the church does grow, can CITP grow in a way that preserves the best of what this church has offered to folks in its early years?” An equally important question would be “How can CITP develop in its first quarter century so that it will have long staying-power as a vital ministry for the duration of this century?”

In answer to the first question, I turned to the work of Joseph Myers, who, in his book *The Search to Belong*, identified four different group sizes and the benefits

and challenges of each. Many people commented back to me over the weekend that they liked this framework. It goes basically like this:¹

- **The Intimate Group:** (3-5 persons) We choose the people – don't even think about assigning us to this kind of community. This is a regular golf foursome or a bridge group. Over time, they get to know each other very well. Their relationships may become quite transparent and their conversation, quite unfiltered.
- **The Task Group:** 6-20 persons who come together with a task-based agenda: to learn a cantata, to organize a community mission project, to do any sort of church decision making, to study a book. These folks may also form deep friendship within this context, but there is also a comfortable space for persons who don't come looking for intimacy per se. The task-agenda is the focus. We can easily decide how much or how little of personal lives and inner thoughts we wish to share.
- **The Social Group:** 25-75 persons who are primarily social with one another. This could be a chamber of commerce, a Rotary Club, or even a neighborhood association that sponsors happy hours once a month. Conversation is light – networking occurs. Task groups and Intimate groups may spin off from this kind of community. This is the size of many church congregations, and the place where many participants feel most comfortable.
- **The Group Rallied around Something Greater:** Over 125 persons, where we cannot possibly remember each other's names and really know each other in depth. This could be a church with 150 persons in a worship service or a political demonstration with 2 million people in the street. A sense of strong connection occurs that transcends needing to know each other in detail. (Please note the gap between the Social Group and this Group size. A lot of churches get stuck between 75 and 125 attendance and are unable to grow through it. CITP grew through it.)

CITP exists already in the largest group size – but its magic is found in the task-sized and social-sized groups. I recommend that you continue to offer experiences in these two group sizes to persons new to the church and those who have been around for years.

2. **The false choice between growing children's ministry and doing social justice/mission beyond the local church.**

¹ Joseph Myers, *The Search to Belong*, publishing data. I am greatly adapting and interpreting Myers' ideas here as we apply them to the CITP context.

This false choice arises (I think) because some may perceive that the church's ministry budget is limited and we must balance line items for mission/justice along with investments in age-level ministry. Both social justice and helping families raise great kids are core values at CITP – there is no competition between these two values: they complement each other.

A case in point: when I met with the church youth group on Sunday afternoon, and the young people began talking about the things that are most important to them in terms of their faith: they were extremely outward-driven in their thinking: climate change, justice for persons with varying sexual orientation, racism, etc. This justice-oriented approach to faith is part of what drew their parents to CITP and it is definitely the kind of faith we are growing in this rising generation.

When we are studying church spending on varied items, we must always include special giving along with donations to the general budget. Likewise, we must always consider all expenditures – both from those special funds and from the budget fund. When we do this, we see that the percentage of church giving to mission causes is greater than what is represented in the budget alone. In addition, we know that there is additional giving to various charitable and political causes by church participants – this is off our collective radar, but it is real, and it reflects how CITP people are living out their faith in action.

I recommend that the church move to a percentage approach (goals in terms of what percentage of your spending goes to fund varied parts of your ministry). This will help you to regulate the varying proportion of your spending, so that all of your values are fairly reflected. However, as you do this, you will be aware that what you may see of your investments in justice and mission are simply the part of the ice burg that floats above sea level.

3. The promise and danger of an identity and branding around a physical place.

You named this church a Chapel in the Pines even before you had secured your land and seen the actual trees, also before your chapel was designed or built. So, in fact, Chapel in the Pines (the name) represents a vision more than a specific facility. That vision, as I perceive it, is captured by a Sabbath respite away from the fray of our busy lives, a space (not a place) where we can recover and reconnect with the God who is the ground of our being and our doing all week long.

The space can be literally on the CITP campus – which boldly expresses the above vision. It can also be found digitally. And as you do ministry for and with others, this holy space can 'pop up' in a variety of places.

No one expressed any anxiety about this – I own that this is my concern. Young churches thrive when there is a nimbleness about them, a sense that they are a

movement of spiritual friends to take action together glorifying God. When, across the years, the sense of movement recedes and gives way to a sense of the church as a building, the tail begins to wag the dog. I want you to be careful to continue to function as a nimble people, even as you curate and develop a magnificent spiritual center in the midst of beautiful forested land, even as your spiritual formation is deeply imprinted with the contours of a special plot of land, a thin space.²

My recommendations will spend considerable time on the development of your church campus – but you are so much more than building and grounds!!

THE STORY EMERGING

In each group that gathered over the three days I was in town, I asked the question, “What is the story emerging here, the story that CITP is in the middle of?” A few themes emerged:

- We are emerging from a pandemic, re-gathering now – a larger church than before, seeking to rediscover our calling and to heal as a church from the trauma and disruption of 2020-21.
- We have accomplished a good part of all that we imagined and planned for the first phase of our church’s life – now we are asking, “What next?”
- The world has shifted on its axis in the last few years and our local community has grown exponentially. Agrarian culture of the traditional Chatham County life experience meets High Tech and thousands of new homes. We are discerning what relevant and faithful ministry looks like in a new context.
- We are approaching the time when the first generation that planted this church and led it to this point will begin to fade from the front lines of leadership. We need to prepare for this generational leader shift.
- We are deepening in our longing and commitment to be a Matthew 25 church, where we live to bring healing and hope to a world in sore need of it. This part of our DNA goes all the way back to the beginning of this church. This storyline focuses upon the community/global impact for good that arises from our coming together.

² Ironically, the next consultation that I had scheduled after CITP was a church, also named for its facility, where the building is approaching 100 years in age. That church is currently declining as they face a repair on their pipe organ that surpasses \$2 million. And that is just the pipe organ. *Thin Space* is a Celtic term for places where many people continue to encounter the Holy.

MINISTRY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to develop your campus and use your space wisely.

You have essentially completed construction of a master plan, offered to you by a gifted architectural firm. This is more rare than you may realize. Most church master plans are never completed: they represent pipe dreams. In your case, you have a lovely campus with offices, classrooms, fellowship hall and worship space.

But you are not quite finished.

A. Develop options for ease of indoor and outdoor worship. As worshippers face forward in the nave of your chapel, if they look to their right, they look out upon a hill that flows downward from the chapel floor elevation to a line of pine trees about 100 to 150 feet away. This hill could easily be adapted into an **amphitheater** – providing an outdoor worship and assembly space that complements your indoor space. In other words: you could develop an outdoor chapel alongside your indoor chapel. During the pandemic, you have re-discovered the glory of outdoor gathering and worship on your land. If you were to end up with three services at some point, basically back to back, the outdoor space could be used at the middle hour enabling ease of traffic flow and set up in and out of the existing chapel.

With summers growing longer in the United States, you can gather outdoors from March until November in North Carolina. I believe that you could run one of your Sunday services outdoors for at least half the year – I believe that this would be very popular and offer something quite distinctive from most other area churches. And, on a rainy day, the indoor chapel is just a few feet away and the service could come indoors.

The land as it currently flows would need only minor adaptations. This is not a project that will require moving loads of dirt. The contour of the hill is already forming an amphitheater. You just need to terrace it and to decide if you wish to install bench seating or to leave the terraced levels grass-covered and invite people to bring lawn chairs. Either approach would be fine. I personally lean toward bench seating, with backs on the benches. I think with fixed seating, you could then more easily use the space for outdoor concerts, plays and the like. If you install fixed seating, you will not want to leave the grass – as the weekly maintenance would be difficult. In that case you could use permeable pavers that allow the rainwater to soak in and do not create new drainage challenges.

B. Don't forget that your best 'building' is the forest that surrounds you.

Beyond the amphitheater, I would encourage you to **further develop your trails and gathering spaces in the woods.** It would be a simple matter to add benches to the little gathering area with the Ebenezer stones. With three rows of benches,

the area would remain very simple, but could be used more often as a small worship space and possibly a campfire space. In our conversations, suggestions of a fire pit area and an open-air pavilion were offered. Both sound lovely, and they would not cost that much. However, I am not sure where you would choose to locate them.

C. Finish out your additional parking (that you have planned).

If you were to run multiple services with short turn-around in between, you will soon discover that you need additional parking. I have not studied where such parking would best go, but it is my understanding that you have studied this. Parking lots will bottleneck and create traffic misery if your services are spaced too closely together and the worship space is running 75 percent capacity. This is no trouble now, since your two services are not that crowded. But eventually, post-pandemic, one or more will exceed 75 percent capacity at times. As you consider this challenge, just pay attention to the attendance at each hour divided by number of parked cars that appear. You may have between 1.5 and 2.5 persons per car. You will need to count. Furthermore, with multiple services that have short turn-around between them, you may need to increase capacity by another 30 percent. **Another old rule: parking spaces tend to pay for themselves if one to two cars appear in each space each Sunday.** When parking bottlenecks, attendance plateaus and income is diminished.

You have funds already designated to add additional gravel parking for approximately 40 cars. Please go ahead and complete this. You will need it, especially if you choose to create a bustling fellowship time between services. Such a fellowship time will help people feel like you are still ‘one church.’ It will also delay early service people from departing and making room for the later service folks. Ample parking will make it all work smoothly, even as you grow.

D. On the subject of children’s ministry: an observation: along with a couple related recommendations.

I suspect that you have too little child-friendly space for the Sunday morning support needed given your worship seating capacity to run an appropriate children’s ministry simultaneous with the service. **I do recommend that you take the children’s ministry out of the narthex and place it in a room that says to your families: we do first-tier children’s ministry here.** We need more fellowship space in the narthex, without the clutter of a pop up children’s ministry. **I recommend that you focus your Sunday morning children’s ministry on one of the two worship hours on Sunday, in order to get a critical mass of participation at one hour.** This also offers a way for teachers and families to participate in both children’s ministry and one of the main worship services if they elect to do so.

As you grow, you may wish to build a small multi-purpose classrooms building at the end of the fellowship hall in the small parking lot area, with access to the rest of the facilities and the kitchen. This addition should be large enough to house three classrooms, but not an enormous addition. It may be that you design it for multiple ages and uses, with retractable walls. I am guessing that 2,000 square feet would be enough space.³ As this happens, you can take space inside your current footprint (and closer to the chapel) and expand your space for nursery and younger children.

In general, the rule is to **keep the younger ones in closer proximity to the parents and then allow older children, youth and adults to meet in more distant space** (from the main chapel). **Until additional space is built, it is imperative that children's ministry have access to the fellowship hall** during the worship service **if they need it**. If there are refreshments served after the service in that room, a team of volunteers can transition the room quickly, having staged refreshments in the kitchen. **The best areas for mingling after worship on many Sundays are the narthex and the area on the front porch and spreading across the lawn toward the parking**. Worship guests need to encounter fellowship areas without having to go out of their way to find them. This will increase the number of new people who stay for coffee, make relationships and who return the next week. This is good hospitality.

Finally, **your current children's playground needs a significant refresh**. Many of your neighbors have better playground systems in their back yards. I know that you have discussed this, and you encountered differing opinions and competing visions for how to develop the playground. **I recommend that you reconvene this conversation and figure something out soon**. The playground does not say *Wow* to me when I drive in – but it needs to say *Wow*: telling each family with young children that they have found their home, as their car pulls into view of the playground.

2. Continue to develop your church culture in a direction that opens up ministry opportunity for CITP.

A. Do what it takes to be an intergenerational church. This will help to alleviate any sense of perceived dichotomy referenced in this report.

In the previous section, we discussed facilities issues related to children's ministry for young people in fifth grade and younger. Beyond issues of facilities, it is important to choose one of two Sunday morning worship hours

³ Expect costs per square foot to be significantly higher than in past construction. Prices have gone up markedly, plus you will be working within greater constraints making it fit in a certain place, as well as matching the current architecture. By leaving it unconnected (except by breezeway), you will keep costs down.

around which you will build Sunday children's ministry. In general it takes an attendance of at least 20 (between ages 3 and 11) in order to gain momentum in children's ministry. This may not be possible without a strong launch, possibly after New Year's Day 2022, when children have been able to receive vaccinations and the pandemic is ebbing.

Your young parents are a busy and distracted population. It will take work to get their attention. Communicate with them what you intend to teach at each age level. You may wish to create a semester with clear goals between New Year's and Easter. As you communicate with your parents, you will gain information helpful in designing a children's ministry for CITP. Some young churches are suspending Sunday school on holiday weekends – feeling that it is not helpful to momentum to try to meet when attendance plunges. Be flexible.

Another possibility for your future is an intergenerational retreat that happens at least annually – in which families gather for learning, fellowship and worship over a two or three day period, often staying at a conference center. Sometimes, intense bursts of programming are easier for folks to fit into their schedules than a week-by-week commitment.

A few churches I've worked with developed mid-week (Wednesday evenings usually) as the major programming time for children's ministry, often paired with a quality meal served before or after onsite, either just for the children or for the entire family. This makes sense in situations where many of the children are bouncing between parents on weekends or traveling with sports. Be open to discover whatever makes sense for your families. Their needs are rapidly changing. Any ministry that works will be designed to work with their schedules and will be framed as compelling investments of time.

B. Live boldly into the Matthew 25 agenda.

You are a church with social justice values and missional commitments. Beware that for many persons today, mission experiences are the kinds of compelling time investments we were thinking of in the previous paragraph. A church in Falls Church, Virginia, brings in scores of families (adults and kids together) for regular Stop Hunger Now food-packing initiatives, creating bags of food for at-risk families in Northern Virginia. Many non-church families enjoy participating with their children in such activities, since they want to raise children who care about others. Whenever you do something in mission or in solidarity with marginalized neighbors, see if you can get media attention. This helps your neighbors to understand that you are a different kind of church than most. It also helps to create wider momentum around whatever issue is in play.

As your church grows, there will be new justice initiatives which will capture the imagination of various members – trying to limit focus to only a few issues (chosen by a church committee) may seem like a logical thing to do, but it will not likely grow participation in justice initiatives. It is better to encourage initiative and to seek to rally and invite folks to join in varied opportunities that arise due to the passions of a few. Sometimes, certain initiatives will gain traction and momentum and become church-wide areas of focus. But, not always!

Your interest in justice initiatives is a part of your church's distinctive brand. There may be certain issues or projects that really go church-wide. My home churches in both California and in DC have both adopted affordable and transitional housing for persons in constant danger of homelessness as issues of church-wide concern. The action plans in each place have been formed in partnership and conversation with others in their locales – so each church has taken a distinctive pathway forward. Many churches have been quite vocal lately in the movement for inclusiveness of LGBTQ people. One that I work with partnered with an LGBTQ film festival and sponsored the world premiere of a documentary about hate crimes. Another created a mid-week coffee house for LGBTQ youth where two-dozen young people rather on most Wednesday evenings.

From your budget, you will spend \$44,607 on missional items beyond CIP local in 2021. In addition, it is projected that you will spend approximately \$53,000 on a variety of missions concerns funded through special offerings and designated funds. Together, this represents a giving pace of nearly \$100,000 a year! This is outstanding. I will speak more to this in the last section of the report.

C. Develop the mantra of *everyone in ministry/all hands on deck*.

Most people do not long to be part of a committee, but are more open to be part of a hands-on team doing something with a limited time commitment that is blessing other people or making a positive difference in the world. If you want more people volunteering, start them out in short-term opportunities – not on committees.

As people join the church, and for all participants each New Year, offer an invitation to everyone to find a ministry team in the life of the church or a team doing something good beyond the church.

With persons under 40, who do not attend every Sunday, Riverside Church in the City of New York began offering a small ministry fair about six times a year in between worship services. People at the coffee hour could see what kinds of ministries were happening, meet leaders, and volunteer. Riverside Church also used these Sundays as on-boarding days for stewardship pledges.

Moving away from a once-a-year rhythm of volunteering and pledging helped them greatly increase congregational investment in their ministry within their younger generation of adults.

D. Step up your hospitality and on-boarding.

As churches get older, they may forget how warmly they on-boarded people in the early days. Please do not lose focus on welcoming new people and inviting them to participation.

It is a good practice to do whatever you can to get people to share contact information with you. They do not all share this the first week they attend. But from the moment they share contact info, contact them that week and every time they attend for four times. You can vary the nature of the contact.

Possibilities include:

- A quality post card – from the pastor, handwritten.
- A phone call (or phone message) from a church member.
- A text from a welcoming team member.
- An invitation to a Next Steps gathering after worship one Sunday.

After four visits, I would seek to meet up with a worship guest for coffee to hear about them, learn their stories and think about who else in the church you would like for them to meet. Also, anybody or any family who has visited four times is ready to be invited to a Next Steps gathering where they can learn more about the church and meet others who are new to the church.

There are two stats that I would keep an eye on: first, what percentage of persons who give us their name actually become regular participants. This represents your batting average in engaging new people. Do what you can to grow this. Your best tool is increasing the amount of time new people have meeting and interacting with existing people. The second stat is the number of people who sign on as members. Based on the number of people who become regular visitors, you can set a reasonable goal about how many of these might be cultivated to join. Do Next Steps events often enough that you can keep the momentum going with your new people while they are still relatively new to CITP.

I love your adoption process with new members, where a member comes along to befriend a new member. Some of these relationships have been outstanding. Do not limit yourself to this strategy. It is especially important that when a family joins that each family member experiences outreach from someone else in their demographic. This is especially true for youth, ages 12 to 17.

Ultimately a person will be adequately on-boarded when we help them find involvement with some group that gathers at least once a month in addition to the weekly worship services.

3. Continue to develop your staffing model to support a church full of people in ministry.

In 2020, your percentage of *budget income* spent for payroll costs stood at 60% of your budget giving, and considerably less than this percentage when we factor in all the missions giving. It is good to hold staffing costs at about 60 percent of total spending. You are doing that. I do not recommend including capital fund giving in this formula, for the simple reason that it is special giving for a set period of time, differing from missions giving, which tends to hold up over time. These details are important so that we get to the real 60 percent of spending (which is usually more than 60 percent of the budget). In addition, churches sometimes will infuse the budget with a special surplus of cash for staffing that they believe will pay its way directly through the growth facilitated by such staffing.

A church I served once built a new facility via capital fund giving, with a part of the capital campaign designated for start up staffing expenses in the new facility in the first three years as we grew into the building. The investment in staff helped to grow the church as much as the building. After three years, the church was able to afford such a staff based on regular annual giving. This is a common staffing rationale for many business start-ups.

Currently, your personnel budget totaled \$268k in 2020. Your total giving has been growing at about 10 percent per year for the last five years, from \$280k in 2016 and 2017 to about \$458k in 2021. Based on this trend, it is reasonable to expect a budget income of \$726k in the year 2026. Just factoring 60 percent of budget income (without missions), your funding capacity for personnel would grow to \$435k by 2026. I think your real capacity could be closer to \$475k by this time.

So, you should be able to grow your staff. Assuming we have an average inflation rate of 3%, it will require about \$320k to support your current staff in 2026 – let's say \$340k to account for unknowns in taxes and insurance costs. This will leave space for staffing growth.

You may have program growth in any number of directions that invite an increased staff investment. Most of this growth could be part time staff. Given the limited volunteering capacity among adults with children at home, you will likely need to increase hourly workers with children and youth ministries. You also should monitor administrative hours – as the church grows, Andrew will be stretched, and it is wise to invest in administrative assistant hours and in executive administrative hours that can support him and keep him in pastoral ministry as a

full-time profession as opposed to a part-time pastor, part-time administrator and part-time secretary all wrapped into one human being.

As you develop your staff, if you continue to have access to young retirees and others who would enjoy working part time without financial remuneration, these folks can really stretch your ministry capacities.

Historically there have been many formulas to indicate how much staff a church needs relative to its size. Most of these are twentieth century formulas. I do think it's good to invest in administrative and support staff – too often we go for director and pastoral positions without the appropriate balance of support staff, and we end up misusing their gifts as they have to do cleaning, set up and clerical tasks that others could do better. Be careful here.

4. Strengthen your practices of ministry budgeting and stewardship development for the 2020s

A. First of all, I recommend that you focus on the development of your church endowment funds. You have a generation of folks who gave a great chapter of their lives to establish and stabilize Chapel in the Pines. They are aging and will one day no longer be with us physically. Many of them will be open to the invitation to leave a bequest to the church that can enable them to have an ongoing impact on this ministry, long after they leave this earth. Now is the time for that initiative. Procrastination for any reason would be a terrible loss. In the future, we do not know what per capita giving levels will be, nor do we know what church participation will be in the broader society. Many forecasts expect a significant dip in both categories. Churches with endowment are better anchored to survive the possibly tougher ministry conditions of the mid-twenty-first century.

Perhaps it goes without saying, but Endowment funds should be limited by covenant to a certain percentage of funds that can be used in any given year. It is best to allow ways to unlock this formula in an emergency – but please do not raid endowment principal above your formula for multiple years. This not only works to weaken the endowment but it also weakens the donor's trust in CITP to steward the endowment, and diminishes future contributions.

B. Be sure that you are teaching stewardship as an aspect of Christian lifestyle and not simply asking people to pledge a budget of ministry needs. A faithful theology of giving is a much better foundation than year-to-year response to the church's desperation. For some, a narrative budget (formatted in terms of a description of impact) is more effective than a simple spreadsheet. This is especially true for new donors who have not learned to appreciate the spreadsheet or to fully understand the church's ministry impact. With younger donors, they must see the impact in tangible ways in order to be motivated to

give. Even if they believe in tithing, the tithe will flow toward perceptions of tangible community and global impact for good.

C. Tell ministry impact stories at least once every two months in worship.

You can sometimes tell these in video format, or as interviews. More often is fine, if the stories are short. We want people to get a sense of how many amazing things happen because of CITP. Offer year-round opportunities to set up automated giving. (Annually, you can make a push for folks to up their giving amount.)

D. Remember your online participants are likely to give generously. Pay attention to them. Try to get them into life groups and onto ministry teams. Develop them as disciples. And challenge them to invest in CITP. We are learning that digital disciples often give at an equal rate to the people who drive onto the campus.