



CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CONGREGATION

Report to the Congregation

March 5, 2023

This report presents the analysis of the responses collected during the January 29, 2023, conversations held at First Baptist Church, Gainesville, Florida.

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Introduction

On January 29, 2023, the Pastor Search Committee called together the members of First Baptist Church in Gainesville, Florida to share their perspectives on the church and their expectations for the next pastor. The members were divided into eleven groups, each guided by a church member, to respond to 11 questions. The questions were:

Opening questions

- What brought you to First Baptist Church?
- When did it become the church for you?
- Why have you stayed?
- What makes First Baptist Church unique?

Search-Focused questions

- What is good about First Baptist Church that I want to keep and build upon going forward?
- What is one ministry priority I would like our new pastor to emphasize?
- What sermon characteristics are important to me?
- What personal traits would I like to see in our new pastor?
- Can you name one significant opportunity our church will have over the next five years?
- What is one significant challenge our church will face over the next five years?
- Should the mission statement be changed?

The conversations took place in focus groups of 5-7 members each. Volunteers in each group recorded their groups' responses in writing. The handwritten responses were transcribed to Word documents by First Baptist Church staff member Jada Getsay. There were four email responses which were converted to Word Documents for analysis. The five documents yielded 5,569 words that were the data points for analysis.

Methodology

Member responses were analyzed using NVivo12 qualitative analysis software. Once the responses were transcribed into electronic form, the member responses (raw data) were reviewed and grouped (a process called *coding*) into categories (called *nodes*) based on their meaning and context. While the data categories aligned significantly with the question topics, some responses were relevant to multiple categories and assigned to those categories. Table 1 lists and defines these representative data categories that arose from the initial review.

The responses were assigned to nodes by meaning units (derived from the context of the use of the word or phrase) and by syntactical units (the words themselves). Once this was completed, the data were analyzed using word frequency queries by node to calculate the most commonly occurring terms within context. As the data were grouped, it became clear that some questions yielded similar responses and therefore were combined for analysis. These were: "next five years" and "future opportunities"; "What is good about First Baptist Church" and "What is Unique about First Baptist Church"; and "Why did you choose First Baptist Church" and "Why did you stay."

Table 1. Data categories (nodes) and their descriptions

Name	Description
Challenges	These are challenges that members have identified for the coming period.
Future opportunities	These are members' statements about First Baptist Church's opportunities in the next five years.
Ministry priorities	These are member statements about ministry priorities for the new pastor.
Mission statement	These responses refer to whether the mission statement should be changed.
Next five years	These are the opportunities that members identify as important for the next five years.
Pastor characteristics	These are the characteristics that members want in a pastor.
Search Committee	These are members' questions and ideas for the Search Committee to consider in the interview process.
Sermon characteristics	These responses refer to what members believe are important sermon characteristics,
Unique characteristics	These are statements that reference unique or distinctive characteristics of First Baptist Church.
What is good/unique about First Baptist Church	These responses reference what members feel are positive, good, and unique about First Baptist Church.
Why choose and stay at First Baptist Church	This node contains references to why members joined First Baptist Church and stayed.

Word frequency analysis has both strengths and limitations. The primary strength is that the most frequently appearing words in the transcriptions become readily apparent, a representation of the importance of the term and its associated concept to the church members. The primary limitation is that this process disaggregates phrases and sentences and analyzes them as separate words. To mitigate this limitation, NVivo12 allows word frequency queries to include generalizations, which account for the context in which the words appear by identifying and grouping like words and concepts.

The final step in the process was a thematic analysis to aggregate the responses and identify the most common shared views among the members. The themes and cross-category (cross-nodal) analysis yielded a framework for the selection of the next FBC Pastor.

To ease visualization of the most frequently occurring words, Word Clouds were created to demonstrate visually the most common terms and ideas using words as the unit of analysis and word frequency as the calculation method. Word clouds yield graphic representations of the words and depict frequency by font size. The larger the font, the more frequently the word appears in the transcriptions. This report presents the word clouds produced from the coded data by category (node) and lists the most frequently occurring words/concepts.

Pastor Characteristics

Figure 4 shows the word cloud produced by the member responses regarding the characteristics they feel our next pastor should have. The most common responses centered around these areas:

- Committed to the congregation and the community
- Personable
- Character
- Friendly to everyone
- Outgoing and Approachable
- Organizational guidance
- Provides leadership

Figure 4. Word cloud: Pastor Characteristics



Challenges

Figure 6 shows the word cloud produced by the member responses regarding the challenges they identify for the church and the next pastor. The most common responses centered around these areas:

- Attracting families with children
- Attracting new members
- Maintaining presence in the community
- Commitment and Consistent Leadership

Figure 6. Challenges

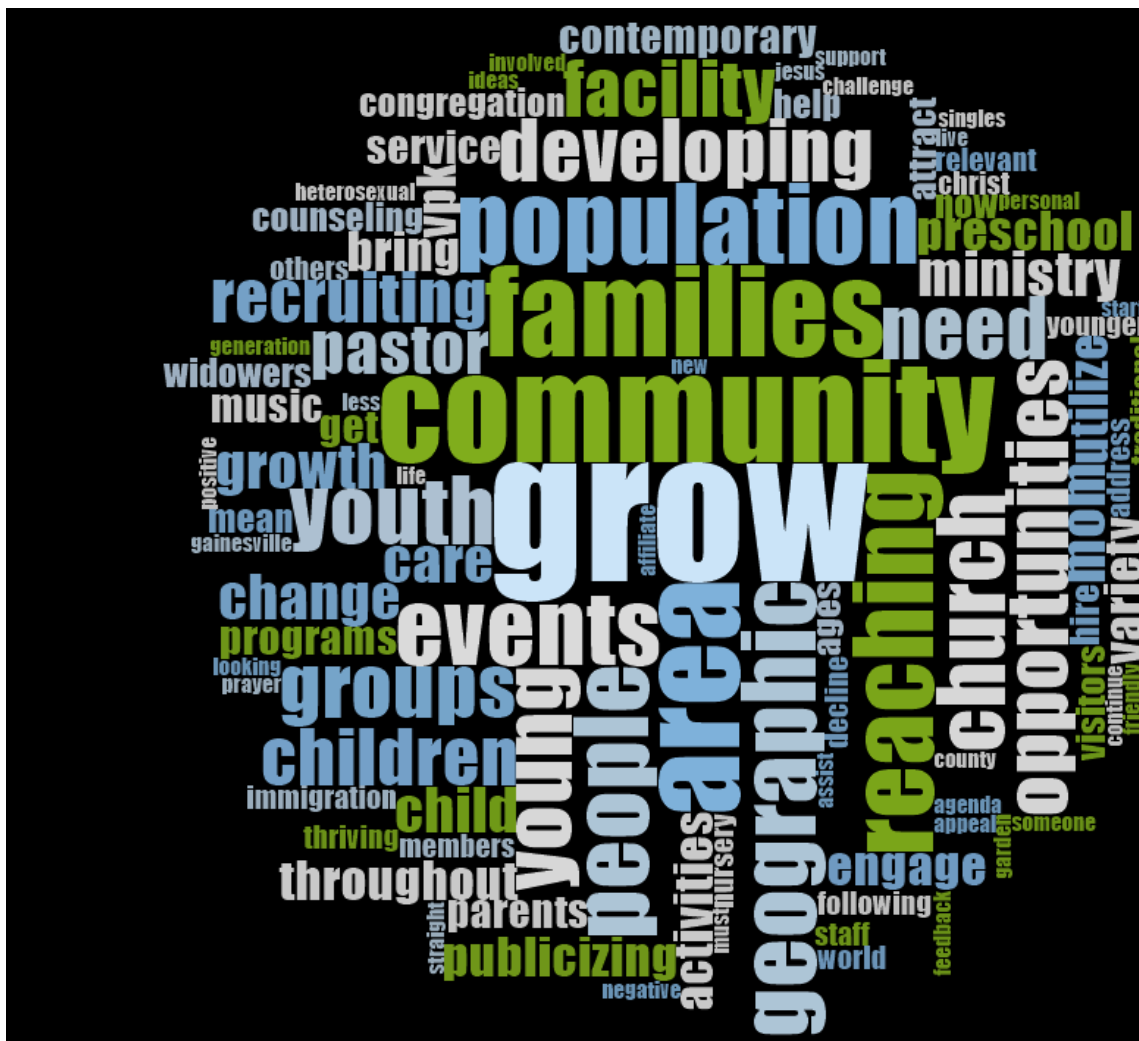


Future Opportunities

Figure 7 shows the word cloud produced by the member responses regarding the future opportunities they identify for the church and the next pastor. The most common responses centered around these areas:

- Grow with the community
- Reaching the developing population in the geographic area
- Recruiting New Families
- Youth and Young People

Figure 7. Future Opportunities



Theme: Transformation

The results reveal that the members believe that First Baptist Church is ready to move forward with a transformative leader. There is a pervasive desire to change, adapt, and grow with a diverse, inclusive membership that continues to provide leadership equity for all members.

Member responses yielded three focus areas that will be important for our next pastor to address. These are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Focus areas

Focus Area	Description
Growth	Build a diverse, inclusive congregation with new members of all ages, with a focus on families with children
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Establish an inclusive environment where all are welcome Ensure that leadership roles remain open to all members
Outreach and Expansion	Connect with the membership and the growing community to increase the scope of ministry

Points of Inherent Tension

The analysis also revealed some areas of inherent tension that should serve as points of discussion as the church moves toward the selection of its next pastor.

Recent research by Lifeway shows that “the younger generation just doesn’t feel like they’re being accepted in a church environment or some of their choices aren’t being accepted” (Scott McConnell, [The Guardian](#)¹). First Baptist Church members indicate that there remains a need for the church to provide both traditional and contemporary worship opportunities to reach all members. The Lifeway findings have implications for the members’ interest in gaining younger membership.

Another area of tension emerged from the predominant desire of the members to ‘welcome all’ and the potentially countervailing effect of controversies surrounding current social issues and specific populations. [Lifeway research](#)² reveals the reasons that 66% of 18-22-year-olds stopped attending church for at least one year: 34% moved to college and stopped attending; 32% found that church members seemed judgmental or hypocritical, 29% didn’t feel connected to the people in their church, and 25% disagreed with the church’ stances on political/social issues. Member responses also suggest that the desire to welcome new members to the church may conflict with some members’ positions on LGBTQ lifestyles. It will be important for the church to establish its position on these and other social issues to strengthen and inform the pastor search.

¹ Gabbatt, A. (2023, January 22). Losing their religion: Why US churches are on the decline. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jan/22/us-churches-closing-religion-covid-christianity>.

² Lifeway Research. (2023). *Fast facts*. <https://research.lifeway.com/fast-facts/>.

A Framework for Pastor Selection

The final analysis and aggregation of the response results yielded a set of characteristics that can serve as a framework to guide the search for the next pastor. Table 3 presents the framework in tabular form, and Figure 8 presents this framework in graphic form.

Table 3. A framework for the selection of the next pastor First Baptist Church

Characteristics	Description
Multigenerational Communicator	Speaks clearly, meaningfully, and understandably to all age groups
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	Encourages and actively seeks diversity and inclusion
	Any member can hold leadership roles
	Ensures that all are welcome to First Baptist Church
Leadership	Young, with some experience
	Male or Female
	Demonstrated Success
	Establishes an environment of care, concern, and respect for all
Commitment	Honesty
	Integrity
	Stability - Long-term commitment
Teaches and Preaches from the Bible	Connects biblical teachings to daily life today
	Engaging orator
Advances the Church's Mission	Knows and enables the church to meet its mission
	Connects the membership to their role in advancing the church's mission
Leads with Vision for the Future of FBC	Has a clear vision for FBC
	Strategically plans for the future of FBC
Revitalize and Grow the Church	Identifies and operationalizes opportunities to expand membership, especially young families, children, and youth
	Develops engaging programs for all members, and grows the church's missions
	Establishes the church as a vital part of and participant in the community
	Serves and nurtures the current membership

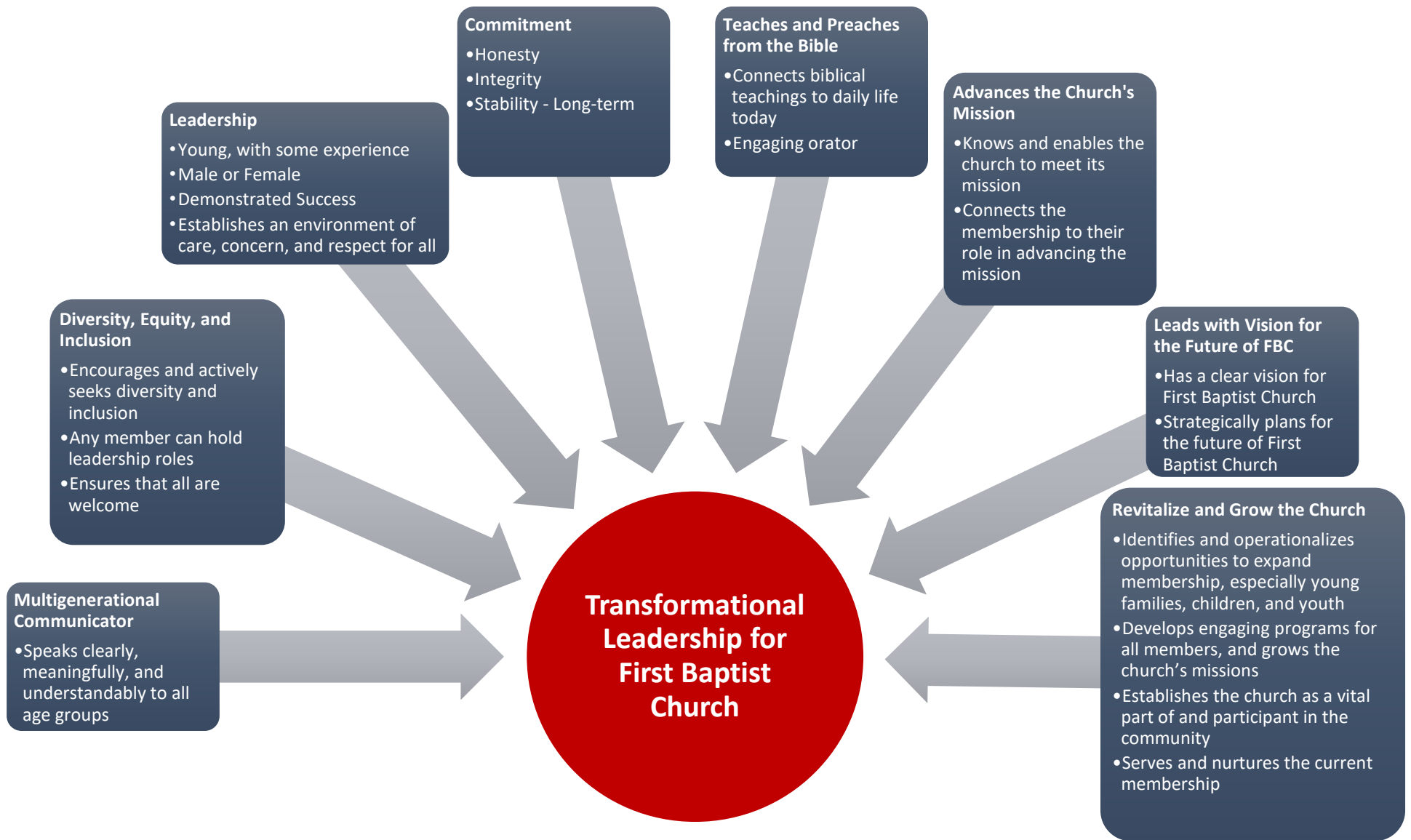


Figure 8. A Framework for the Selection of the Next Pastor