

Soundings Project Pre-Meeting Work 2021

Report on Hub Activities

- List of Activities
 - 2021
 - Ongoing work
 - Holding various face-to-face and virtual one-on-one meetings with congregations
 - Reviewing/refining project proposals and early-stage project work
 - Providing resources to congregations, including mailing out *Living Vocationally* (by Paul J. Wadell and Charles R. Pinches) to all the congregations and leading focus groups at select congregations
 - Assisted CLMPI quantitative and qualitative research initiatives by providing feedback on survey design, distributing surveys, gathering participants for qualitative research, and undergoing training in qualitative research
 - Created annual check-in form for congregations, distributed to congregations based on project approval date, and reviewed their submissions
 - Set up Padlet as a communication and sharing tool among congregations, in addition to the website and private Facebook page
 - Hosted Gatherings
 - 2:00–3:15 pm on Thursday, April 15th (via Zoom). Two congregations presented on their projects, and the Soundings Project leadership team provided updates, including about the surveys.
 - 12:00–1:30 pm on Tuesday, September 21st (at George W. Truett Theological Seminary). We encouraged congregations to submit their project proposals and introduced the annual check-in forms and Padlet.
 - Created report for Board of Advocates in spring 2021
 - Established overarching research questions in collaboration with the Soundings Project Research Team:
 1. What language do people use when they talk about vocation (calling)? When describing what vocation is, do people gravitate toward certain stories from Scripture, or speak of spiritual gifts, or do they draw upon other sources?
 2. What elements of the church's life together are most formative for people's growth into understanding and living out their sense of calling?
 3. How might it be communicated best that all Christians have a vocation?

4. How can both church leaders and members participate fully in shared reflection about matters of calling?
 5. How might church leaders and members better understand and communicate both the communal and individual natures of callings?
- 2022
 - Soundings Project Retreat at Laity Lodge Ecumenical Retreat Center (2/23–26). This will be similar in format to our retreat in 2020, but we will focus at least somewhat on addressing pastoral mental health issues. This focus on mental health grows out of our one-on-one conversations with congregational leaders.
 - Points of Discernment
 - We are continuing to figure out the best ways of supporting congregations that are spread out along the implementation timeline. Moreover, in terms of emotional fatigue, we find that 2021 has been harder than 2020. COVID fatalities in Texas are approaching 40,000 in 2021 alone, compared to just over 31,000 in 2020. While resilient, our project congregations are coming through an exhausting time.

Report on Congregation Activities

Christian ethicist and writer Paul Wadell spoke at the Soundings Project retreat in early 2020, emphasizing how Christ has called the church to be a community of friendship that cuts across traditional dividing lines. Such friendship stands athwart prevailing societal individualistic and tribalistic norms.

Three members of Primera Iglesia Bautista de Waco, including pastor Emmanuel Roldan, attended the retreat and decided to frame their CLMPI project around the theme of friendship. The multi-faceted project that resulted, “Called to Friendship” (*Llamados a la amistad*), is designed to “facilitate environments where deep and diverse friendships develop and bear witness to God’s kingdom”

(<https://www.primerawaco.org/who-we-are>).

Intergenerational and interethnic small groups meet to discuss communal and individual vocations, and the congregation provides seed money for small experiments to deepen this community further. For instance, small group participants organize weekly Sunday night fellowship dinners that are welcome to anyone (see the photo to the right).



Small group leaders meet regularly to share stories and ideas for the coming weeks, as well as to encourage one another. The congregation also held a small group retreat in October 2021 at nearby Cedarbrake Camp that deepened their friendships further (see photos below).



Pastor Roldan is analyzing this project in his Doctorate of Ministry dissertation at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary and hopes to draw out lessons that could benefit other congregations.

Although Primera Iglesia Bautista is still gathering insights from the "Called to Friendship" project, the congregation believes that the project could be adapted to other congregations exploring calling and discernment.

Whereas some metaphors of the relationship between God and human beings—such as the juridical metaphor—are very common in certain Christian traditions and thus can lose some of their power, the metaphor of friendship continues to be fresh for many Christians and yet has deep biblical grounding (see, for example, John 15:15). The metaphor naturally invites congregants to take a renewed look at their relationship to God and to the other members of the body of Christ. Given the widespread use of the term "friend" in popular culture (such as in a Facebook "friend") and the simultaneous shallowness of many of those relationships, congregants have been surprised by the much richer biblical image of friendship and have come to see it as identifying a central calling in their lives and meeting a deep hunger for companionship.

Friendship captures well the lifelong commitment entailed in following Christ. Pastor Roldan notes:

"Since embarking on our project, we have learned that we often take our stories for granted. We are learning how one's testimony is more than just mere reportage of a moment when one was 'born again' and is instead an ongoing narrative that helps us discern our past, present, *and* future.

As we share our stories in short-term small groups, we are creating worlds in which we can discern our calling, hold one another accountable to our calling, and edify one another toward our calling. Through small group environments, members have been able to discern God's gifts within the congregation in real-time and members often remark that they had no idea how gifted their group members were. We hope to continue to the process of spurring one another on 'toward love and good deeds' as we listen to one another's stories of faith in these small group environments."

The first step in adapting the “Called to Friendship” project to another congregation would involve planting the language of friendship in various conversations and ministries. As energy builds around this language, pastors and church leaders can think of ways of developing the language and theology further, such as through sermons, Bible studies, and book studies (on Paul Wadell’s *Becoming Friends*, for example). Eventually, though, such language needs to be put into practice, just as Primera Iglesia Bautista is doing.