

Spring Woods Vision, Values, and Strengths and Weaknesses

Vision

Bringing diverse groups of people together with love.

Values

Worship/Preaching

Education/Discipleship

Resources to share/Financial Stability

Strengths and Weaknesses (from VCI Consultation Weekend)

STRENGTH #1: A LOVING CHURCH FAMILY

The consultation team learned from interviews, focus group discussions and the self-study what a loving and caring congregation this is. Many said that the people are the "best thing" about their church. Several mentioned that this is their "family," and they thrive on the relationships, friendships and support fostered here. There are long-standing Sunday School classes and meaningful ministries. We heard many positive comments about the new women's Bible study that meets in private homes. We also heard repeated comments affirming Pastor Arrington's integrity, compassion, and willingness to listen to others' viewpoints.

STRENGTH #2: STRATEGIC LOCATION WITHIN A GROWING MISSION FIELD

God has placed Spring Woods UMC in a location which has great potential to both serve and reach the community. According to the demographic study, there are more than 119,000 people within a three-mile radius of the church. The MissionInsite report for this area found 40% consider themselves "spiritual" yet do not have a church home; 29% say they are conservative evangelicals; 17% say they feel it is important to attend religious services; 15% enjoy watching religious TV programs; and 14% say "faith is really important to me." These figures reflect a population that is less connected with religion and church than in Texas as a whole.

Mystery worshippers reported that people in the community are aware of Spring Woods UMC. Most people at neighboring businesses could identify the church's location when asked. The church's main sanctuary fronts a major road in north Houston with a traffic light at the church driveway. The Spring Woods Christian Academy also enhances the church's visibility in the community.

The region as a whole is growing faster than the rest of Texas. The demographic growing fastest is families with youth and children. Neighborhoods with changing demographics provide numerous opportunities for outreach, collaboration, and transforming lives. The Spring Woods UMC campus (land and buildings) has no outstanding debt and is a significant asset. While now underutilized, and with some facilities in need of repair and upgrades, this property has great potential for ministry to the surrounding community.

STRENGTH #3: DIVERSITY AND A HEART FOR MISSIONS

Spring Woods UMC has a rich history of mission work both locally and in other parts of the world. The community ministries and missions include: Homeless outreach (including Grace Trailer), Micah's Closet, food pantry, recovery ministries and Belize missions. Its outreach includes a partnership with an elementary school, backpack programs and haircuts for low-income families.

The diversity of Spring Woods UMC's congregation and staff is a key strength. Sunday mornings showcase two worship styles, demonstrating sensitivity to the preferences of a wide variety of people.

STRENGTH #4: DEDICATED PASTOR, STAFF AND LAY LEADERSHIP

Spring Woods enjoys a talented staff and numerous devoted lay leaders with passion, competence and willingness to serve. The consultation team was encouraged by the high turnout of members and staff for interviews, focus groups and workshop. They seem eager to discover and lead new initiatives for growth in each of their ministry areas.

Pastor Arrington has a passion for the people of the congregation and multicultural ministry. We heard from a member: "He instills excitement, he instills caring, and you can't avoid feeling that when you listen to him.

STRENGTH #5: A DESIRE TO REVITALIZE THE CHURCH

The team heard you tell us of the strong desire to prayerfully seek God's direction, to discern the opportunities to become a healthy, financially stable, thriving church. There is a hunger to tune in to God's vision for Spring Woods UMC. During the interviews and focus groups, people shared a desire for a renewed spirit with a unified focus for moving forward. The consultation team also heard during the focus groups and workshop that participants are ready to begin doing the work necessary to revitalize the church.

CONCERN #1: LACK OF CLEAR UNIFIED VISION BASED ON THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The vision of the church, "Love God, Love Others, Make a Difference" is printed in the weekly bulletin, on signs around the campus, and on promotional materials. However, it is not clear that the ministries and resources of the church are intentionally aligned with the vision. Staff and leaders seem unclear about how their specific work and ministries connect with and implement the vision. There are no clear and measurable goals that require accountability and track progress. We did not observe a system to identify and develop future leaders.

We affirm your efforts to be a vital force with multiple styles of worship. However, the different worship communities lack a unified vision and a clear, direct connection to the mission of the church. The result is a silo effect and disunity among the worshippers at the two services. "Our biggest problem is no vision," one congregation member stated. "There has to be a plan to have a vision, otherwise it's just a

dream,” another person told us. One expressed a desire to “have people join because of the church’s new vision.”

Attempts to combine the services have not been well-received. Some members told us they opt not to attend when worship services are combined. We also heard from leaders that “some traditional service worshippers don’t accept the contemporary service, or even the contemporary worshippers.” While the church’s website features “Three Styles of Worship,” the Pueblo de Dios contemporary Sunday afternoon service in Spanish is not, in fact, affiliated with the Methodist church other than being housed in its building.

A clear vision also makes it easier to enlist volunteers. When prospective leaders and helpers understand how their role relates to the overall vision of the church, the prospect of serving can be a joy and not a burden.

CONCERN #2: DISCIPLESHIP

Spring Woods UMC does not have a clear, strategic process or Discipleship Pathway that brings people into the church and moves them into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ. While there are Sunday school classes, prayer groups, and small groups meeting in homes, there is not a clear pathway to help newcomers or regular attendees become disciples who make new disciples. Careful attention must be given to the developmental needs of every stage of faith.

Assimilation, the team heard, can be difficult and a barrier to true discipleship. Some people told us they still feel disconnected after years of membership.

We heard from some longtime members that there are few members in the under-40 age group. However, our focus groups identified three members under 40 who said they were willing to serve in some capacity. One of these thought the church was simply “recycling veteran leaders.” When presenting new ideas, a young member felt that no one was listening. Lack of childcare for infants and small children is an impediment to member participation.

Multiple opportunities for all children and youth to learn and socialize with peers should be a strong component of any discipleship program. While there are programs within the church and in Spring Woods Christian Academy, intentional disciple development for each age group can be much stronger.

CONCERN #3: INCONSISTENT HOSPITALITY

While members feel a strong sense of connection to one another, it can be challenging for newcomers to feel welcomed. Hospitality, we heard, was inconsistent. While there may have been a process for this in the past, it appears to often be overlooked.

This was borne out by tepid ratings given by the mystery worshippers. Hospitality at both services had shortcomings. There is much room for improvement in the first impressions presented to visitors. The likelihood that a first-time visitor will return often depends on those first impressions.

A mystery worshipper at the 9:00 service reported: “I was greeted separately by two female individuals, just before and immediately upon entering the sanctuary. Both smiled sincere ‘good mornings.’ Just inside the sanctuary door, a greeter handed me a bulletin packet, asked my name, and provided a smiling welcome.” Another guest observed: “After sitting down, the person on my row did smile and

nod at me. The greeters were very friendly. Most members were not very outgoing and just simply sat in pews waiting for service to start.” A mystery worshipper at the 9:00 service reported, “I would have had a more positive experience if other congregants had informally greeted me as we waited for the service to begin.” Another was disappointed to find no one at the visitor information table after the service. Contact information is not always captured.

At the 11:15 service, a mystery worshipper noted, “no one acknowledged us, and there was no one at the visitor table (at the 11:15 service). Another visitor to that service, who arrived early, reported: “There was no door greeter. I noticed the bulletins on a nearby table and I took one. I entered the room and I sat on an end seat closest to the main entrance to the room. No one approached me or spoke to me. I was seated in a highly visible area for 25 minutes and no one spoke to me.” More than one first-time visitor was told “you’re in my pew!”

CONCERN #4: COMMUNICATION

We learned that there are many opportunities to improve internal and external communication. The website is outdated and not easily navigable. It is difficult to find information easily. Many prospective members expect to find information about a church online before they decide whether or not to visit. Social media could be used more effectively and consistently.

First-time visitors were confused about how to get into the parking lot. They couldn’t tell how to get into the worship service/sanctuary. We learned that people who drive by often miss the existing signage on the busy, cluttered street.

The team heard from people in interviews that information is not always conveyed in a timely enough manner to inform those who need it. There are information silos operating independently of one another. Other than the weekly bulletin, which received a high rating from the mystery visitors, there are few communication best practices being followed. Outreach events are well attended, but do not translate to new worshippers.

CONCERN #5: FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The consultation team continually heard that the overall financial situation of the church is of great concern to the congregation. To furnish necessary resources for effective ministry and facility needs, the church needs a plan. While it is commendable that the congregation steps up and meets crisis needs when announced, it lacks a comprehensive financial sustainability strategy.

Our interviews with leaders and the self-study reveal that Spring Woods UMC has approximately 118 giving units (households). Of these, the top 10 contributed 40% of the church's income in 2017. We also heard from many that the top tier of givers consists of the oldest members and when some of these members have died, it has substantially impacted income.