

Capacity Report

Southport Christian Church
Indianapolis→Greenwood, Indiana



Introduction

Southport Christian Church has been looking seriously at its future. After study and reflection, the congregation came to a painful conclusion that the community around the church changed dramatically, and that the congregation no longer effectively served its neighbors. It was at this time the church began to explore the possibility of relocation, noting many potential future target areas.

The process got a boost in 2016, when the Chin congregation they had shared life with for so long, decided they would purchase the church facility which would allow Southport a 2 year window in which to relocate.

Relocation is complex for a congregation. It requires a church to have clarity about its values, and why it exists. Before a church can move, it must gain some clarity about the place they are moving toward, and how a church might make a difference in the lives of those they are about to engage.

Form follows function: The ministry of the church drives decisions about the kind of facility the church will need for the future. It dictates the location. It creates the kind of space that is needed. We can no longer just build a church facility, and then hope to fill it.

After researching the south side of Indianapolis, Southport, (working with Hope) began to focus on a specific area on 135, south of Smith Valley Road. Since January of 2017, congregational leaders have been looking closely at the people who live in this area, and have researched their numerous needs. They discovered an area that was experiencing significant population growth of families with children.

As a result of the team's work, a few people put their findings into a creative Future Story which outlines how they envision this congregation making a difference in the lives of its neighbors 5 years into the future.

This report is developed to help the congregation make priorities, and reach the full capacity of their Future Story as they begin to imagine what they will build. **It is meant to be a guide of what could happen, not a step by step recipe.** In many cases there are embellishments of the Future Story that may strengthen the prospects or purpose of the element described.

In this report, we selected three elements of the story in order to prepare a capacity report and unpack those elements for capacity building. Other elements are outlined at the end of the document. The author has chosen the elements that are likely most challenging to the congregation to unpack, rather than unpack each element which I believe leadership is capable of doing.

No plan, future story, or Mission statement can ever move a congregation into a new way of being. Implementing the story is the task of the leadership of Southport. It is our desire that in working together the church will reach its fullest, God given potential as you connect with God's mission.

Author

Rev. Dr. Rick Morse, Vice President of Hope Partnership

The Future Story (as written by Southport)

As I walked through the front doors of Open Table Christian Church, I couldn't help but notice that a man I had welcomed for the first time last week had returned and was enjoying a cup of coffee while talking to some other people I had never met before.

I met Noah last week when I was trying to make a quick exit right before the benediction, to beat the rush out of the parking lot. But Noah caught my eye as he was sitting in the lobby, tearful and obviously distraught, so I went over to check on him. "Sir, I couldn't help but notice you were crying, is everything alright?" I asked. "Yes, I am doing just fine. It's just, I never thought in all of my life I would find a place where I felt God's presence without feeling judged and hated for who I was. A place where I felt welcomed while also being able to worship God." As Noah spoke, I couldn't help but think back on all our church had done to get to this point. I thought to myself, "This is the perfect opportunity to share our Church's story with him, and to let him know that he was right, he truly did belong here." So I politely asked Noah if he had some time, we had already missed our chance to beat the parking lot rush. Noah replied, "Of course I have time, it's Sunday, I have nothing else to do."

I began, “Five years ago, our church made a decision that has forever changed our history. As a congregation, we voted on selling our building on the Southside of Indianapolis and moving to this current location in Johnson County. We sold the building to Chin Christian Church, a church that had been worshiping and growing in our church building for many years and wanted to continue their ministry there. They now worship almost 1,000 people every Sunday there.” “Wow!” Noah replied. “That is a lot of people!” “You are right, and it was a very tough decision, as we had been in that building for almost 60 years. But seeing the Chin Christian Church thrive has been instrumental in validating our decision. Believe it or not, this was not the first time we had moved as a congregation. Back in 1958, half of the congregation at Olive Branch Christian Church went to seed themselves in a developing area on the Southside of Indianapolis, the place that we called Southport Christian Church.” “That is really interesting,” Noah replied, “I have never heard of a church packing up and moving to a new location, much less two times.” “That’s not even the best part about it” I said. “Just wait until you hear the rest.” Noah was attentively listening and very interested in what I was telling him.

“As Disciples, we have what is called an ‘open table’, meaning everyone-no matter their race, gender, sexual orientation, family dynamic, **faith background, or stage of spiritual growth**-is welcome to take communion every Sunday. And as a church, we decided that just saying we have an open table was not enough. We wanted to extend that invitation from the table out into the community. We wanted to be a church where everyone, and we mean everyone, is welcome. Not just at the table, but into the family of Open Table Christian Church. A place that includes all, accepts all, and celebrates every individual just as they are. We prayed and diligently looked to find a place that needed this kind of church the most.”

“This must have been a very scary process” said Noah. “Oh believe me, it was the hardest decision this church ever had to make,” I replied. “Many members of the church spent years meticulously working to make the church what it is today. Not everybody was onboard at first either. We lost some members because they just couldn’t see the future for what we called Southport Christian Church. But we persisted through the tough conversations, the late night meetings, the tearful encounters, and the loss of church members--family really. We came to the conclusion that the church wasn’t dying, the church was *evolving*. Just like the evolution in the natural world, our faith journeys and faith communities must evolve over time. This evolution isn’t easy, but in order to survive we must respond to external events as they happen around us. And so as a church family we embrace the changes God calls us to make in order to continually meet the needs of our community as it advances.”

“One of the hardest parts about the move was that we totally had to reimagine our church and in the process some of our programs and traditions disappeared. This was tough for some of our members, especially those who had been there for many years. We have continued a traditional style worship and in our other two services have found settings and styles that allow creativity and set us apart from some of the contemporary, concert-style worship of our neighbors. There was some concern about so many worship times dividing the church family, but we have found unity in our All-Church events and in our weekly book and Bible studies that primarily meet on Thursday evenings. The changes didn’t happen overnight, and they weren’t without struggle and hard work. But when we look at our church today, and see the influence we have had and continue to have on so many lives, we know we made the right decision.”

“Our church has become a place that supports all families, whatever they may look like. This strong desire to walk alongside people in their individual faith journeys gave way to one of our strongest and fastest growing programs: our support group ministry. There are several different leaders for classes on financial planning, time management, drug addiction, and dealing with depression. The coolest part about it is if someone sees a need that is not being met, they are invited to start their own support group to fill the need.” Noah replied, “that is wonderful how you give everyone in the church the opportunity to lead in a way they feel benefits and provides meaning for others. I’ve never been to a church that encouraged such a thing,” “It is a neat opportunity and we have had nothing but positive response from those participating. A young mother named Julie joined the drug addiction support group about three months ago when she heard about it from a friend in her neighborhood. Julie has a teenage son who suffered a major knee injury playing football last year. Her son became very depressed, as he was set to go to college on a full sports scholarship the following year. After several surgeries to repair his knee, he was put on strong painkillers to which he eventually became addicted. This addiction began to spiral out of control as he continued to experiment with other, stronger drugs when his prescription for the pain killers ran out. Through the support group, Julie has learned different behavior management techniques when dealing with a drug addict, how to set boundaries, and has been provided with many resources for addiction recovery centers and programs. While the process will be long and painful, Julie has expressed how much of a help this program is in her and her son’s life. She even joined the church last Sunday with her husband. They are excited to become more involved in the activities of our church. Julie cannot say enough about the open and accepting environment where she doesn’t feel judged for being a ‘bad parent’.”

“As a church, we also have a very special place in our heart for youth and children. We believe that they are just as much the *now* of the church as they are the *future* of the church. The footprint that we leave in the community and around the world is largely

based around our youth. Our youth have been the best evangelists and the number of young people in our church continues to grow. We have a special area in Sunday morning worship for kids ages 2 and above. We call it our “Worship and Wonder Playground”. There is a carpeted area that is moved to a new spot each week with resources and supplies to facilitate creative interaction with the scripture and other pieces of the service each time we gather to worship. Parents are invited to sit with their children as they create, respond and participate as equal members of our worshipping church family. It took some getting used to, not everyone was okay with crying babies or noisy children asking questions. But those moments now serve as a reminder of the curiosity we should have when we think about our relationship with God. We’ve even made an area where “Wonder Creations” are displayed from the previous week. And some of our members from other generations have even been found sitting and creating in the Playground. It is wonderful to see all ages praising and loving God together. Youth also spend some of their Sunday’s volunteering in different mission opportunities in the community such as the local food bank, helping the elderly in our congregation with yard work, and helping to clean up the streets of our community. And two times a year, the youth are able to participate in mission trips where they travel to different cities around the world to provide service and assistance to those in need”.

“One of our youth, Marie, invited her friend Claire from school about a month ago and she enjoyed her time here so much that she in turn has invited four more friends over the past month. She told me just last week that she was so excited to find a place where she could be herself and didn’t have to pretend to have her life all put together. She explained the many pressures she had been feeling lately from her parents, her peers, and even her volleyball coach. She never felt like she was good enough and it felt like her world was caving in. So she resorted to self-harming acts to release her stresses and anxiety. However, when Marie invited her to Open Table Christian Church, all of that changed. She found a place she didn’t feel pressured to believe a certain way, and found people didn’t chastise her for her slipping grades or for losing her recent volleyball match. She has made several new friends and looks forward to seeing them each week. She has also used some of the valuable lessons she’s learned on Sunday mornings to help peers at school who are also struggling.”

“It is not only the youth who are involved in volunteering around here, we also have weekly missional opportunities available for the whole family. We encourage all ages to get to know and work alongside one another. We assist with construction projects, soup kitchens, refugee resettlement, and the Ronald McDonald House among other things. We are a very mission-oriented church and look to do as much as we possibly can to help our neighbor both near and far.” “This church just keeps sounding better and better,” replied Noah. “I have always wanted to volunteer my time and talent but never really knew how to

go about it. I don't think I will have trouble finding a place to plug in!" "That is wonderful," I replied, "we would be happy to help you find the right opportunities for you."

"I know I am taking up a big portion of your Sunday, but do you have just a few more minutes?" I asked. "I have all the time you need," replied Noah. "This is the best conversation I have had in a long time." "Great, well I just wanted to tell you about a few more things we have going on right now in the life of our church. Just a few months ago, we started looking into the opportunity for a preschool on our campus after the dramatic growth of children in our congregation. We've found through conversations with some of our new young families that reliable, caring, low-cost day care programs are hard to find nearby. Many of the best programs are either too far of a drive, or cost more than these young families can pay for each month. That's when our 'pay what you can' daycare idea was born. The neat thing is, we are able to use our sanctuary as the main class room. As you saw when you were in worship today, the Sanctuary is very flexible and the space can be adapted for almost any purpose. This has been a wonderful help as we try to be stewards of our space and other resources. We can truly feel the presence of God whenever we use this flex space. We frequently have dinners and always send out invitations to our neighbors. We also can convert it into a space for concerts, exhibits and local events. We have some very talented musicians in our congregation and they love being able to share their talents with everyone in such a well-equipped and acoustically sound space. With such a versatile space, it is used almost every day." "I have never been to a church that does much else with their Sanctuary than just worship on Sunday mornings." replied Noah.

"Yes, and because the space is so flexible, the building does not need as many different rooms to meet the needs of all our programs. This gives us more land outside for our outdoor ministries. We have a large community garden. In fact, over the past few years we have such large yields the food banks ask us to take some of the produce we've donated elsewhere! We also have a large recreation field used by many to play softball, soccer, football, and other sports. Community members are always welcome to use the space as well. You can often see a little league or pee wee football team practicing in the evening, dependent on the season. We recently started a horseback riding program for children with autism. Every month, one of our gracious church member brings her horses to the property to work with the kids and teach them how to ride. It has been one of the most rewarding programs and the number of kids attending has increased from only two kids to fifteen in just three months!

Our current capital campaign has the goal of raising a new building on our property that will serve as a year-round retreat center. The new building would be dedicated for the 30th year of our Youth Camp ministry and will finally allow us to do our camp program

onsite instead of renting a facility. The retreat center would host quarterly introspective retreats for individuals and could be used by local groups for their own day or overnight meetings, retreats, sabbaticals and conferences. The retreat center would also allow us to host wedding parties and their guests as blocking hotel rooms in the area can sometimes be tricky. Our move five years ago gave our leadership the experience needed to continue dreaming. We've learned that flexible spaces are best in order to evolve with our ministries without feeling boxed in."

Noah was sitting there quietly and seemed so perplexed by all that we had talked about. "I have to tell you..." Noah finally spoke after a minute of silence. "This is like no place I have ever been. I've never been to a church, community center, or any other structural building that has filled me with so much joy, love and hope. I wandered in here last Sunday with my final cry out to God. I have frequently contemplated taking my own life but there was something inside of me that made me get inside of my car and pray. And as I sat there, I prayed that God would take the wheel and take me where I needed to be. And as I drove down 135, I no longer felt I had control of the wheel. A few turns later, I didn't even know where I was. But the property was so beautiful and the sun was hitting the building at such an angle that it looked as if God was shining down on it. So I got out of my car and this is what I found. A place where I feel welcomed and loved and there are no requirements to change who I am in this very moment."

I replied, "I am very happy that God led you to this place Noah. We strive every day to be a church that focuses on supporting families, no matter what family looks like or means: to grow together in faith, to love each other, and to love and serve the world around us because that is what God calls us to do. We hope that your life has been changed for the good and that you will continue to bless us with your presence here."

So as I went up to Noah for the second Sunday in a row and saw him talking with several people I had never seen, I reintroduced myself. Noah said "How could I forget you, you are the one who made me come back. You inspired me with your story of the church and all of the people who have been so positively affected by your ministries. Today I brought three of my friends who have never attended church before, but they could not wait to check it out after I shared with them all that you told me last week. I followed the example of Marie who has invited so many youth and thought it was my turn to become the evangelist. I can only hope that Sarah, Chris, and Tyler are able to find the same comfort, hope, and peace that I found seven short days ago when I walked through the doors here at Open Table Christian church."