Church Name Evaluation: Focus Group Results
From the Board of Directors
December 21, 2010

Executive Summary
This paper reports the results of 4 focus groups we held with people who are not yet part of our Church to evaluate the effectiveness of our Church name. The groups consisted of people who are in our core target audience for potential new members. We asked each group to evaluate our current church name and possible other names. Details are presented below, but here are our high-level observations:

• The focus groups were highly critical of our current church name. To them, our name doesn’t distinguish us from other churches, and even sounds a little scary and fundamentalist.

• We also asked the focus groups to share their reaction to 15 other possible names suggested by people in our congregation. Five emerged in the “top rung” – and are described below. Generally speaking, people liked names signaling that we are a kind and gracious Christian community who welcomes diversity.

• The Board has scheduled a series of internal focus groups to hear your feedback on the ideas presented in this document. The dates and times are listed below. We hope everyone will pick a date and participate in this vital discussion!

Background
At our Annual Congregational Meeting in February, we plan to vote on our Church’s 25-Year Plan. The Plan calls for us to launch an incredible sustained outreach effort, beyond anything we’ve ever done before, communicating our message of hope! Before we expand the intensity of our public outreach, we need to make sure we have the most effective possible name to carry us through the next couple decades of our long-term Plan. We don’t want to launch the Plan, only to later decide we need to make a change midstream.

In the Bible, there are prominent examples of times God gives someone a new name to reflect a new and greater phase in their lives. Jacob became Israel. Simon became Peter. Saul became Paul. The question for us is: Have we reached such a time?

Although many factors determine whether a person decides to visit a new Church, the name is one of the most important. A name provides vital clues about the personality of a Church. In the focus groups, we learned that those clues are often subliminal – meaning people may not even realize how they’re reacting to your name. But if you ask them, and they stop to think about it, they share all kinds of impressions, based on the name alone.
We want to make sure our name is sending a powerful welcoming message! This is an important Biblical principle. The Bible teaches that we should be savvy enough to reach out to others in ways that work well in the culture in which we find ourselves (First Corinthians 9:19-23). Our message was set by Christ and does not change, but the methods we use to communicate that message need to be culturally sensitive.

With that in mind, we organized four focus groups with the kind of people most likely to consider attending our Church. The four groups were drawn from:

- **The Gay/Straight Alliance**, University of Indianapolis – 19 participants
- **Indiana Youth Group** (gay and transgender teens) – 15 participants
- **Roots & Wings** – straight parents in a progressive home-schooling group that meets at our church on Wednesdays – 8 participants
- **Indianapolis Women’s Chorus** – 10 participants (we invited the Indianapolis Men’s Chorus, but their schedule precluded participation in December)

We deliberately wanted to hear from people who are not yet part of our Church. It would be hard for we who are already part of the Church to objectively assess our name, since we’re so familiar both with the name and the work of our Church. So we turned to friendly outsiders in our core target audience to ask them what our name says to them.

And, wow, did we get an earful! We learned that these folks really love and respect our Church, what we stand for, and what we do. But they have a lot of trouble with our name. Here’s why.

**Focus Group Comments About Our Name**

In each focus group, we asked folks to talk about our Church name. We asked no leading questions. We simply said, “When you hear the name – Jesus Metropolitan Community Church – what do you think?”

- **Positives of Current Name.** There were random positive comments about our current name. Some said it sounds like a name you would expect for a Church. A few people specifically liked having “Jesus” in the name because it clearly affirmed our Christian focus. For some, “metropolitan” suggests that we are urban and diverse. For others, however, “metropolitan” sounds like a cold, impersonal civic organization, as in “Metropolitan School Board.” For some, “community” suggests people lovingly supporting one another and that we are not a narrow denominational church. For others, however, “community” is an uncomfortable word either because they have been excluded from most societal “communities” in their past (for them, “community” equals “clique”) or because it suggests we’re a homogenous neighborhood family church with limited regional and global impact. The most thorough discussion of the word “community” occurred with the Women’s Chorus. Most in that group
had mildly positive associations toward the term, but there was a consensus that the word is not positive enough to consume 4 precious syllables in an organizational title, especially since the word “church” already suggests a place of mutual love and support.

- **Negatives of Current Name.** The vast majority of those who spoke about our current name were very critical. It quickly became clear that what we think we are communicating by our name is not what most others hear. The following themes were mentioned in every single focus group, spontaneously, without any prompting:
  
  - **Too Long.** In each group, people noted that our name is too long to be easily remembered – 12 syllables is the length of a sentence.
  
  - **Denominational.** In each group, several said our name sounded “denominational,” which was a negative for them. For these people, denominations represent Christians separated, whereas they want a more diverse gathering of Christians united.
  
  - **Too Generic.** Many said our name is generic and boring. This was the most frequent comment in each group, which really surprised us. They said our name could be the name of most any Christian church – that our name doesn’t tell them anything about what flavor of Christian church we are – or why they should come to our church instead of another. (Note: To us, our name is a ringing affirmation that we are Christ-centered, distinguishing us from some MCCs and affirming Churches that are not. To people in our focus groups, though, that’s “inside baseball.” Most of them simply assume that most churches are Christ-centered. What they want to know is: What kind of Jesus do you preach? What flavor of Christian community are you?)
  
  - **Which Jesus?** Again and again, people said that when they hear “Jesus” in our church name, they think of the mean, judgmental Jesus of their youth. Hearing these discussions, we were overwhelmed at what modern American churches have done to distort the image of “Jesus” and “Christ.” After listening to these focus groups, it is clear to us that if we use “Jesus” or “Christ” in our title or motto, we must find a way to signal the “kind” of Jesus we’re talking about. In the Women’s Chorus discussion, one woman’s comments captured what we heard others say, in various ways, over and over again. She said:

    “When I hear ‘Jesus,’ I think of the Jesus of my youth. I grew up in churches who preached a narrow, mean Jesus. **I don’t even know that your loving Jesus exists.** I’m exactly the kind of person your Church is probably trying to reach – and I think I would come to a Church and be willing to listen to preaching about Jesus and grow in my understanding of him. But first you’ve got to have a name that will get me
in the door. Waving Jesus in my face won't get me there. What I need to know is that you’re a different kind of Christian church than I’ve experienced in the past.”

- **Sounds Fundamentalist.** In each focus group, people observed that only fundamentalist churches seem to use “Jesus” in their title, whereas a broader range of churches use “Christ.” To them, our current name subtly suggests fundamentalism.

Based on the foregoing feedback, the Board believes we need to give serious consideration to a name change, with the goal of communicating more clearly and compellingly the kind of Jesus we serve and the kind of Christian community we are. Doing so could significantly increase our ability to share our message of hope and life in Christ.

**Name Options**

During October and November, the Board asked our congregation to submit name suggestions. Almost 200 were submitted! Thank you for such creativity! And thank you for being the kind of congregation that loves God so much that you are willing to consider making changes that would position us to be even more effective.

The Board carefully reviewed the many suggestions, and selected 15 of the most promising. In each focus group mentioned above, we asked participants to assign numerical ratings to each of these 15 names – as well as our current Church name. The leading names to emerge from these surveys, in the order of their ranking, are:

1-LifeJourney Church
2-Path of Grace – Indianapolis
3-Path of Life – Indianapolis
4-SoulFocus
5-CrossPoint Church

Below is a summary of focus group comments explaining why these names were rated so highly.

- **LifeJourney Church.** Why was this name rated highest? To the people in the focus groups, this name suggests a Church that recognizes that life is a journey. So right off the bat, it sounds like a Christian community that “gets it” – a Church that is “real.” People in the focus groups resonated with the idea that life is a journey, with twists and turns. The name, LifeJourney Church, suggested to them a Church that: (a) recognizes that we all are at different places on our journey, and (b) is willing to meet them graciously where they are. This captures an important aspect of how Jesus ministered to people. He graciously met them where they were. The name also conveys a critical truth about our particular Church – that we are a Church who emphasizes holistic discipleship, that our Christianity is about our whole lives not just a small compartment of our lives, and that we need to keep growing, rather than
getting stuck in any one place. In addition, the name LifeJourney Church is clean, short and easy to remember – only 4 syllables. It doesn’t sound old or stodgy or institutional. Interestingly, this was the only name of the many we surveyed about which not one single person had any negative comment. All the other names, even top-rated names, had at least some detractors.

- **“Path of Grace” and “Path of Life.”** The word “Path,” like the word “Journey,” suggests recognition that life, and spiritual growth, is a process. Thus, the word “Path” carries many of the same positive associations as the word “Journey.” Focus group participants also really liked the word “Grace.” It helped them grasp the kind of message we share at our Church – that it’s a message of hope and love, not condemnation and judgment. A few people expressed slight reservations about “Path of Grace” and “Path of Life” because the word “church” is not included – which they said might lead to some confusion. To some, these two names might also sound a bit too traditional or “high church” – not quite so contemporary.

- **SoulFocus.** This name was well rated because it communicates a Church community that is focused on spiritual growth and development. Also the name is short and very easy to remember. It’s doesn’t sound institutional or denominational. A few expressed reservations about the absence of “church” in the name. A few others said the word “Soul” might be confused with “sole,” implying a narrow, single-minded Church.

- **CrossPoint Church.** This name was well rated for two reasons. To some it speaks of the cross of Christ – and the fact that we are a Church who points people to the cross. Others who liked the name said it caused them to think about the key “cross points” in life when we evaluate our direction and meaning and how we want to live. For yet others, it suggested a Church that brings together people from many different places in life. One drawback for this name is frequency of usage. Six churches in central Indiana already use “Cross Point” in their names. So there might be potential for confusion.

- **Motto.** As part of our name evaluation process, the Board believes it would also be helpful for our Church to adopt an official motto – a brief statement that will often appear under our name. This would give us a chance to further define ourselves for the people we are trying to reach. However, a motto needs to complement a name, so we need to get clearer on our name evaluation before proposing specific motto options.

- **MCC Affiliation.** A name change will not adversely affect our denominational affiliation with MCC. MCC itself has intentionally planted MCC churches that do not have “MCC” in the public name because they understand that long, institutional-sounding names don’t work well in our current culture. For the next couple years, the Board believes we need to focus intently on being a positive influence within MCC, then re-evaluate. Consistent with that, we have entered into an official partnership to help MCC train clergy and are actively participating with MCC in other projects. We are focusing on the positive and working hard to ensure MCC maintains its historic Christian focus.
How You Can Help!
With the benefit of the foregoing thoughtful feedback from people outside our Church, now it’s time for us to have the same kind of deep discussions and do the same kind of thoughtful evaluation internally.

The Board of Directors really wants to know what you think!

So we have scheduled three different Focus Group Gatherings at the Church. We scheduled three so that hopefully everyone will be able to attend one. *Everyone is welcome!* Each Focus Group will last about 90 minutes. In these Focus Groups, we will ask you to share and hear thoughts about:

- Our current Church name;
- The concerns expressed in the outside Focus Groups; and
- The leading names to emerge from our congregation’s suggestions, as rated by the outside Focus Groups.

Remember, overriding question is not, “What is my personal preference?” *Rather, we all must discern together what name will best serve the mission of our Church.*

The date and time of the Congregational Focus Groups is:

- Focus Group No. 1, Monday evening January 3 at 7:00 pm
- Focus Group No. 2, Wednesday evening January 5 at 7:00 pm
- Focus Group No. 3, Sunday afternoon January 9 at 1:00 pm

After these Focus Groups, the Board of Directors will prepare a recommendation to present for vote at our Annual Congregational Meeting. See you at one of the Focus Groups!