

Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church Strategic Plan 2004

Developed by Congregational Leadership

With Assistance from Kevin Ford

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Strategic Planning Introduction

Let's face it; church ministry is intense and time-consuming, both for pastors and volunteer leaders. It often takes everything you have just to keep up with the routine – preaching, visiting, counseling, leading volunteers, taking responsibility for ministry and programs. Every now and then at a conference you will hear fragments of phrases like 'long-range planning', 'vision', 'strategic planning', and you think 'That stuff is great for big churches with lots of staff but I am neck deep and treading water just keeping up with the day to day'.

The fact is that thoughtful planning - **strategic** planning - will help you in the areas where you are most burdened – time management, priorities, responsibilities, leadership challenges. Developing a strategic plan may well be the most crucial step in maximizing the effectiveness of your ministry.

And yourself.

What Is Strategic Planning?

The most important thing to know about strategic planning is that it is a **process**, not a project or a product. There is more value in the process itself than in the end result.

And the process never ends. Strategic planning is an often-renewable exchange of information, ideas, dreams, hopes and vision that keep a church sharp, passionate, and focused.

Strategic planning helps you understand the current state of your church, helps you determine what your church is called to be, and provides tangible and immediate action steps for the next part of your journey. In addition it will orient you for the path 5, 10, even 20 years ahead.

Please don't confuse strategic planning with "master-planning". The writer Bobb Biehl describes master-planning as "a written statement of a group's assumptions about its direction, organization, and cash."¹ Master planning is typically associated with facility and site development. While strategic planning may touch on these items, it also includes a lot more, and is much more focused on action, specifically on strategic initiatives that emerge from the planning process.

Strategic planning will help you determine the realities of your church, shape or sharpen your core values, mission, vision, and strategy, and point you to next steps to move your church from being good to being great.

It is a process that involves lots of hard work and thought, as well as the engagement of church leaders, both lay and professional. And it is perhaps the single most important thing you can do to insure the unity, focus, and effectiveness of your church.

Strategic Planning involves the following elements:

¹ Biehl, Bobb. Master-Planning. Broadman and Holman, 1997; pg 7

- A thorough assessment of both external and internal factors that play a role in your church's health and growth. This includes a demographic study of the church's target area, interviews with church members, and a careful study of the church's internal data.
- A search for common themes from the assessment raw data that highlight the key issues facing the church. This material is placed into an assessment report that includes observations and preliminary recommendations.
- A strategic planning retreat with up to 25 church leaders. This includes the formalization of core values, mission, and vision, strategy, determining the church's most significant areas of need, and developing action steps for strategic initiatives for the immediate future as well as mid- and long-range execution of the strategic plan.
- A final report in PowerPoint format that summarizes the work of both the assessment and retreat phases and provides a constant and clear reminder of the commitments the group has made.

Why Strategic Planning?

We haven't forgotten that pastors and volunteer leaders are busy, just trying to manage the day to day. It is tempting to put time-intensive and long-range projects like strategic planning on hold in order to meet the cycle of demands each day of ministry brings. It is worth considering the classic definition of the differences between the "urgent" and the "important".

Urgent issues demand to be done now. People are waiting, needing, sometimes demanding. If you put out urgent fires you will likely be considered to be a good pastor, responsive to his or her congregation. There is immediate gratification for meeting the demands of the urgent in the satisfaction of completing a task and in the praise of others.

There is nothing wrong with meeting urgent needs. They are a very real part of what it means to be a church leader. The problem comes when the demands of the urgent drown out the voice in your heart that tells you that you need to build long-term considerations into your work.

Important issues can be put off for a time. Parishioners will complain if a pastor does not make an expected hospital visit. No one is likely to come to a pastor's office and say "Pastor, I am concerned that you are not giving enough attention to strategic planning. And it is not just me; a lot of us are feeling this way"!

But doing ministry without strategic planning is much like camping in the wilderness without a map or compass. You can accomplish a lot of urgent things where you are – providing shelter, searching for wood, starting a fire, preparing food. But once you get ready to break camp, you have no idea where to head next. The business of the urgent is important and fulfilling until you look up and realize that you are not quite sure why you are working so hard and where you want to go next.

Strategic planning provides both the map for the journey and the compass for clear direction. Taking time out to insure that you have these items will insure a more effective journey.

Why plan strategically?

- So that your work in the present is part of a bigger picture.

- So that both staff and volunteer leaders are united around a clear purpose and direction.
- So that the church will know what it wants to be when it grows up and a clear understanding of what it will take to get there.
- So that your church will have the energy that comes from unity in mission, vision, values, and strategy.
- So that you will have a measure of what NOT to do or to prioritize and so that you will have an agreed upon standard when there are disputes about the nature and style of your church's ministry.

Strategic planning is an investment that will require time, deep thought, confronting the facts with brutal honesty, probably some conflict, and a lot of hard work. Is it worth it? Review the bullet points just above and answer that question for yourself!

This is an ongoing process for our Council and staff. We have included many members in our focus groups and discussions. This is not ever to be a "final" document, but a continual work in process. Thank you for your input and support!

Our Situation and Context

As a starting point, our church went through a process of reviewing our context. We looked at the issues that have emerged within our church and community. We examined our strengths, weaknesses, and other issues. The following are the key issues that we identified for our planning process.

- **Strengths**
 - Gifted people
 - Leadership
 - Location
- **Weaknesses**
 - Lack of focus / vision
 - Consumer culture
 - Facilities / infrastructure
 - Resources
- **Opportunities**
 - Untapped Gifts
 - Sammamish Area
 - New Leadership Team / New Start
- **Threats**
 - Change may result in failure
 - Fear of losing people

Our Core Values

Core values are the commitments that drive an organization day to day. Values tell the members of your church what they do and don't do, how they make decisions, how they handle conflict, and what every leader must be committed to. Values shape the hiring and firing process as well as performance evaluation systems. Values provide a true North Star to which to turn for focus. The following are our core values:

- Empowering beyond comfort
- Connecting to serve
- Awakening and affirming
- Enjoying the journey

Our Mission

Mission is simply the core purpose of any organization. It describes why the organization exists. It is not vague or overarching; it is precise and focused, memorable and short. The noted management guru Peter Drucker once said that an organization's mission statement should fit easily on the front of a T-shirt. We might take that a bit further and say that a truly stellar mission statement should be no more than one sentence long.

As we will develop more fully later, a mission statement contains a **reason** for the organization's existence, a measurable **result** by which to judge the effectiveness of the organization, and a **restriction**, which clarifies what the church does NOT do. Mission orients an organization to its reason for being and should be a daily motivator for each member. The following is our mission statement:

Real faith, for real life, in real service

Our Vision

Vision is often seen as a mystical thing, the province of super-human leaders and people who are just a bit smarter and more intuitive than the rest of us.

In fact, vision is much simpler, if no less inspiring than that.

Vision is a picture of the future that beckons you across the bridge separating you from the present and your destiny. It is clear, tangible, and most importantly specific and measurable. Vision is not dependent upon words. Rather, it is a clear picture. People may articulate a compelling vision in different ways. But they will describe virtually the same picture of the future.

The writer Jim Collins provides a useful way to think about strategic architecture. (You could do much worse than to thoroughly digest Collins' books *Built to Last* and *Good to Great*, as well as make frequent visits to his website www.jimcollins.com).

All of the following concepts can be found in developed form in Collins' two books and in helpful briefing form on the website. In fact, his concepts course throughout *Strategic Planning*.

A key insight from Collins is that it is the task of an organization to "preserve the core" while "also stimulating progress". Preserving the core means owning and living and dying with your mission and core values, or your "core ideology". The core ideology rarely if ever changes. Stimulating progress indicates a courageous willingness to change, if needed, everything that is not part of the core ideology. This changeable part includes cultural norms and practices as well as specific strategies.

It's not hard to apply this to the unique conditions of church ministry. The core includes not only your mission and values but also your core theology and ecclesiology. These are the things you cannot compromise and be true to who you are. On the other hand, specific practices and strategies must be updated and revised constantly if the church is to be true to its mission of speaking timeless truths in an ever-changing world.

Vision, to Collins, emerges from the intersection of preserving the core/stimulating progress, plus what Collins calls an "envisioned future", a combination of seeing the organization years out and BHAG's (Big, Hairy, Audacious Goals), goals that are nearly outlandish in their scope.

Our Vision Marks...

- **Fun along the way**
- **Important to the community**
- **Radically open**
- **Everyone connected and involved (no silos)**
- **A place to be**

Our Strategy

Strategy tells an organization where it will focus its efforts for a period of time (often 3-5 years). Strategy is a reflection of the changing context in which the church operates. Strategy answers the question of how we will fulfill our mission in the medium-term future in light of changes to our context. It is not intended to be enduring. It tells us how we will allocate our resources and what our areas of focus will be. Strategy often begins with an identified “target audience” – who we are seeking to serve or attract. As we understand the needs of these people, we then create areas of focus to meet those needs.

- ❖ **Everyone connected and involved through discipleship and affinity groups**
- ❖ **A place to be through enhanced facilities consistent with our vision**
- ❖ **Radically open through focus on un-churched people on the plateau**
- ❖ **Open and intentional stewardship of talent and finances**

Our Initiatives

Initiatives are specific ways of implementing the strategy and fulfilling our mission. They are big-picture “actions” that we will undertake over the next few years.

To Be Developed With Member Input

Next Steps

Council: Please develop the following:

- ❖ **Communication / input plan**
- ❖ **Initiative development / action plans**

Appendices

1. Demographic Study by Linda Hines

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SAMMAMISH, WASHINGTON September 2004

“The Vision of Sammamish is a community of families. A blend of small-town atmosphere with a suburban character, the City also enjoys a unique core of urban lifestyles and conveniences. It is characterized by quality neighborhoods, vibrant natural features, and outstanding recreational opportunities. A variety of community gathering places provide numerous civic, cultural, and educational opportunities. Residents are actively involved in the decisions that shape the community and ensure a special sense of place.” *Sammamish Comprehensive Plan*, adopted September 16, 2003

The Vision Ideals for community designs are:

- Maintain a small-town atmosphere and suburban character so that new development will complement Sammamish’s existing character as well as allow for diversity and creativity.
- Provide a family-friendly, kid-safe community.
- Encourage community gathering spaces which invite human presence, arouse curiosity, peak interest and allow for interaction of people
- Establish a unique sense of place for visitors and residents.
- Respect the character and integrity of existing neighborhoods.

The 228th corridor is a primary focus in all of the land use scenarios. There are three designated community center--the existing centers at Inglewood Center and Pine Lake Village, and the planned City Hall/Park at the Sammamish Commons.

The current **population** of the City of Sammamish is **35,930 in 18.1 Square miles**. The city had 6,000 residents in 1970. The City's growth target for the year 2022 under the Growth Management Act and done in negotiation with King County is to add 3,842 units. As of the end of June, the City had issued 1,789 permits for residential units of this 3842 units. Once these issued units are occupied the City will add an additional 4,472 residents (2.5 persons per unit). This leaves only an additional 2,053 units to be built over the next 18 years. This will add an additional 5,132 residents.

The City of Sammamish is dominated by **single-family residences, with over 90 percent** of the housing stock being of that type. Over 90 percent of these homes are owned by their residents. In addition, 54 percent of the households have children. The population is also young. **More than 50 percent of the population is under 34 years of age**. In new developments, about 15% of residents move within three years; there is a higher turn-over rate in Klahanie.

The **median income (2000 estimate) is \$101,592**. In a telephone survey in 2003, 65% of respondents had incomes over \$100,000. Median home value in 2000 was \$362,900.

Crimes per 1,000 residents in 2002 were 14.3, compared to a national average in the United States of 41.4. These are crimes of murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny, motor vehicles theft and arson. Of these crimes, the largest number were larceny (stolen property, embezzlement, fraud) at 323, followed by burglary (104) and auto theft (31). Under the category of domestic violence, assault in the 4th degree is the most frequent (25). In 21002 330 adults and 140 juveniles were charged.

Targeted Populations:

Teens

Plans are underway to provide more gathering places for teens. A Redmond/Sammamish Boys & Girls Club is planning a new youth center and just hired a new teen director. Currently the center is located in a 900-square-foot portable located near Northeast Eighth Street and Inglewood Junior High. It offers junior high to high school-age teens after-school activities including guitar lessons, pingpong, foosball and a place to simply hang out.

The YMCA is purchasing land near Pine Lake Middle School and plans to build a new center that will have more programs for teens.

Sammamish State Park is planning major changes, including an indoor water park. This is expected to be a popular destination for teens and young adults year-round.

Seniors

A significant number of seniors currently live on the Plateau at University Place, Providence Point, Bellewood, and Providence Marianwood Nursing Home. Construction is underway at the former LOMA Center to build an assisted-living facility.

Additional Statistics:

Males: 17,192 (50.4%), Females: 16,912 (49.6%)

Median resident age: 35.3 years

Races in Sammamish:

- White Non-Hispanic (86.1%)
- Chinese (3.3%)
- Hispanic (2.5%)
- Two or more races (2.5%)
- Asian Indian (1.3%)

- Japanese (1.0%)
- Korean (1.0%)
- Black (0.8%)
- American Indian (0.7%)
- Other race (0.6%)
- Other Asian (0.6%)

Ancestries: German (22.6%), English (17.5%), Irish (13.1%), Norwegian (5.5%), Italian (5.0%), United States (4.1%).

*For population 25 years and over
in Sammamish*

- High school or higher:
98.3%
- Bachelor's degree or
higher: 61.5%
- Graduate or professional
degree: 20.5%
- Unemployed: 1.9%
- Mean travel time to work:
30.3 minutes

*For population 15 years and over
in Sammamish city*

- Never married: 18.4%
- Now married: 74.2%
- Separated: 0.8%
- Widowed: 1.5%
- Divorced: 5.2%

9.9% Foreign born (5.3% Asia, 1.9% Europe, 1.8% North America).

This information is from the Sammamish city web site, the internet, and conversations with realtors.

2. Focus Groups by Stuart Bond (2004)

Dear Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church Leadership,

It was a privilege to meet you this past weekend. And thank you, John, for your warm hospitality. I had the opportunity to discuss some of these perceptions with John personally before I left. Below is a summary of the message I received from these groups. When all was said and done, I found the boomer group to be the most important.

Please feel free to contact me by email with any questions you might have. I will look forward to seeing you all in several weeks.

In Christ,

Stuart Bond

1. Youth

My read on this group is that they generally have very good impressions of the church. They enjoy the informal worship and like the messages. They have appreciated their time there and they like the current leadership. As is typical for a late teenager-young adult demographic in a suburban church, they wish there was something for them. Several of them voiced caution and hurt regarding the difficulties the church recently went through. One person represented those outside the church who said he drives by but has no contact with this church. A suggestion was made that a Wednesday, before school doughnut activity happen for Skyline kids. What was striking to me was the energy that was generated, as if they felt it would be great to do virtually anything that illustrated creativity and life in this area. They had no concern about moving the church and sensed family at SHLC.

Possible directions: A set up of gatherings in someone's home, perhaps on a monthly basis, for this age group might be a low cost solution and send the right message to these young people. For the "bread and butter" ministry of middle and high school, SHLC is walking before it runs. The pieces are just coming into place. As soon as possible, make it a priority to get on the community's radar with your youth program and get some public exposure for your staff persons.

2. Boomers

In almost every case, they came because of their own or their spouse's previous Lutheran involvement. Their initial attraction to this church was its location and the warmth they experienced from the pastor. A factor in keeping them there was and remains the quality of sermons. They are variously described as "intellectual", "not right wing", and even "wonderful". The message and the spirit of ministry were relevant to the Plateau in terms of respecting the hard work of the people rather than criticizing them for not being "Christian enough".

My sense of this group is that they are cautiously optimistic. The first two values—location and warmth—are threatened at this time. Regarding warmth, they are still skittish from the time of troubles. There is a sense of permanence to John's ministry at SHLC, but it has yet to be proven. Further, there is a mixed review of John's warmth in the sense that former pastors were warm. This is mixed up with their vague sense that they are not certain about the future direction of the church.

Regarding location change they were very concerned. In their view, the current location is still viable. They also do not see adequate evidence of growth to require moving. Their position is "prove it to me." The idea of moving illustrated a pet peeve of this group: that decisions are made without adequate forethought, as illustrated by inadequate budget planning. Their sense is not that the church is growing and vital but that it is surviving and struggling.

In this regard, they felt the church can and should ask more clearly when it comes to stewardship. When I mentioned the notable affluence of the area, they were quick to caution that there was a lot of financial need behind the façade. They also pointed out that people "felt" strapped now that they had less resources than previously due to stock market drops, etc.

There was uniform disdain for the idea of de-emphasizing "Lutheran." It was referred to as "sinking to the lowest common denominator".

Possible directions: First, time is on the side of the leadership. As the youth program comes into focus they will see results. Likewise for the traction I believe you will continue to gain in worship numbers as you continue to provide excellence from the pulpit and stable leadership. Second, these individuals do want to be part of the solution. I was impressed by their readiness to have a more direct stewardship program.

My sense is that their criticism or distance has left them out of the old leadership circles they had occupied. The trick is, how to re-enfranchise them while maintaining the direction of the leadership? This can be accomplished in several ways. Focus groups, for a start, allow their input without making you beholden to their opinion. In the ministry realm, John can strategically recruit some of these folks for retreat participation and other activities where they can see the warmer side.

As the church grows, there is a real fear that the close, family atmosphere will be lost. Addressing this with an increased emphasis on relationships, small groups, dinners for eight, and other fellowship opportunities is important. Finding opportunities in worship with children or illustrating the service of members, as you are already doing, will continue to close this gap.

Naturally, all of these concerns are endemic to the community. Sammamish Hills used to be the territory of engineers. It has become the haunt of baby boomer executives, with their confusion over wanting to be friendly and yet also running packed schedules. We want family in an efficient way. These individuals are coming to grips with the idea that the church is readying to take a new form. Like the community, a lot has changed. If they can feel more comfortable with the future, they just might help lead the charge. This is the year for buy in.

Two cautions come to mind. The first is to be careful when talking about money. There is the desire to appear to be just regular folks no matter how much money they have. They are a little afraid that they will be evaluated as dollar signs rather than as people. The second is around the de-emphasis of Lutheranism. In fact, John's preaching is going to continue to be just as Lutheran and non-Lutheran as it is today. The preponderance of Lutheranism as the "ticket in" for this group was overwhelming. So pushing too hard away from this is a rejection of them. Finding a way to affirm Lutheranism while altering it to fit the current situation is the challenge. I believe you are already accomplishing this far better than most Lutheran churches.

Finally, my recommendation is that the leadership outline a process for decision making on moving versus staying that will involve a larger circle than the current leadership. In my experience, the process of a church finally coming to such a decision would be two years in the making. Beginning sooner rather than later would seem to be in order.

The family group was a delightful bunch and that young couple in your church is a very positive asset. The last group was pretty happy with the direction of the church, not too easily moved by changes one way or another. They did wish for a few, large group social activities.

Conclusion: It takes a lot of energy to get a train started. The first phase is convincing the riders that the train is safe and will not fall off the track. I would think that much of that has been done. The train is pulling out now and some of the passengers are uncertain if this is the direction they want to go. Most, however, are glad to be moving. Some are delighted to stick their heads out of the windows and look ahead. This year, the train picks up speed.

3. Code Discovery Process by Kevin Ford (2003)

Let me begin with a coffee story... (this is Seattle, right?)

An American coffee company (not Starbucks) was really struggling in the 1980's. Sales were down and they had lost market share. So they hired a marketing firm to find out what people liked and disliked about different kinds of coffee. They thought that they could then change their product – improve the taste, buy better beans, or whatever was called for. After carefully studying the results, they changed their product to conform with what they heard. They then launched an ad campaign that fell flat on its face. Why? They didn't know.

So, they hired Dr. Clotaire Rapaille, a cultural anthropologist who specializes in understanding the “code” or cultures and organizations. Through a series of sessions with coffee drinkers, he began to uncover what coffee “meant” to people, rather than what they liked about it. They recalled their earliest memories – the aroma of coffee meant that mom and dad were up and it was time to start a new day. Then they recalled experimenting with coffee as teens. He found that they didn't like the taste, so they doctored it with cream and sugar. What Rapaille determined was that you can't ask Americans what they like about coffee. In general, Americans don't care for the taste of coffee itself (which is why we doctor it), as much as we do about the meaning of coffee. The aroma of coffee gives us a new start. The experience of coffee makes us feel comforted, just like being at home as a child knowing that mom and dad are there to keep us safe! Is it any wonder that Starbucks, Seattle's Best, and Peet's have captured America? With dozens of ways to mask the taste of their coffee (Café Mocha is my favorite), they provide us with all of the aroma and experiences that speak to our deepest needs of comfort and security. And think of the Folger's ads – the best part of waking up. And the person in the ad is not drinking the coffee... but is smelling it!

Coffee, as Rapaille discovered, was symbolic of something deeper within the culture – what we call the “code”. Every culture in the world has its own unique code, or DNA. Cultural anthropologists have studied cultures for years to give us insight into each culture's unique symbols, language, customs, and norms. Why, for example, do so many Americans drive SUVs when most studies suggest that they are more dangerous and costly than sedans? It's in our code. Americans will always want “bigger”, rather than “smaller”. We want a bigger

steak, a bigger buffet, a bigger house, a bigger church. It's virtually impossible to find anything American that has built success on being "smaller". It's an emotional response – not a logical response.

Just as every culture has its own code, so does every sub-culture – cities, neighborhoods, churches, schools, and businesses. Marketers have recently begun to understand the importance of code in selling their products. For years, marketers have conducted focus groups and research on people's likes and dislikes. But they have ignored the more fundamental question of "why" people have likes and dislikes. It's in the "why" that we begin to identify code. But most churches haven't ever thought about their own code. I'm glad that Sammamish Hills is beginning this process!

Your challenge in this process is not to find out what people like or dislike about church, but to tap into the code of your people (and those in the surrounding community). In essence, you need to be like the coffee company – focusing on the meaning of coffee, rather than the taste of coffee.

The Origins of Code

The code of a culture, organization, or church, is simply a collection of primary "imprints" on the brain. Each person has her own unique code, primary imprints from early in life. When many people share similar imprints, we find organizational code. Shared imprints are called "cultural archetypes".

Cultural archetypes are symbolic associations, primarily from similar experiences in early childhood. Think of how the code might be different between Americans versus the Romanians who grew up in the oppressive regime of Ceaucescu. People "learn" only when their emotions are triggered. If there is no emotion, there is no true learning. The most emotional period of life is early childhood (up until 8 years old). The second most emotional period of life is adolescence, when life is changing drastically. The experiences that we have during these fundamental stages create lasting imprints on our brain. We process symbols and interpret information according to cultural archetypes.

The challenge, however, is that code is often invisible to those on the inside. It is so automatic and ingrained that we don't identify it. Like the air we breathe... we don't understand it or think about it. It just is. The problem within the church is that because code is invisible, we often confuse the cultural conditioning of code, with morality or spirituality. This is why racism, sexism, corruption, and all kinds of evils end up being justified under the guise of spirituality. The code is right brain – our justification becomes a left-brain exercise. In the church, this means that we often spiritualize what is not spiritual because we can't explain it logically. This occurs on a lesser scale as well. Consider "traditional" music. We often appeal to "traditional" music as being somehow more spiritual than contemporary music. Logically, this makes no sense. Luther turned beer-drinking songs of his day into hymns. He was contemporary, not traditional. But when we turn pop songs into worship music today, there is a reaction. Tradition, within the church today, is part of our cultural conditioning. It is connected to our code. But it is not spiritual.

The Importance of Code for SHLC

People make decisions based on emotion, not logic. Logic is usually an afterthought – a justification for an emotional decision. Roger Sperry won the Nobel Prize for his research into how people make intuitive, or emotional, decisions using their right brain – and then back up the decision with reasons from their left brain. The right brain responses are usually instinctive, based on early childhood imprints (usually outside of our conscious awareness). We trust certain people intuitively and we distrust others intuitively. As a church, you must have an atmosphere of trust with your members and your prospective members. This must be solid before any new initiatives or strategies can succeed. And to have trust, you have to crack the code of your congregation. Once you crack it, you can change it (if necessary).

The concept of code helps us to understand how people process information, how they think and feel, how they make decisions, and what symbols have great power. In essence, by cracking the code, you can begin to create solid relationships within your congregational system. You begin to create symbiotic relationships – where people share an affinity with each other at deep levels. It is in this affinity that you build loyalty with your members.

Many churches adopt ideas and strategies from other churches. Pastors attend conferences and read books. They then come back with a new method that will attract people. Often, it

works. The church starts to attract new folks and things seem like they're going well. But these same churches tend to have a back door that's as big as their front door. They are losing members in throngs. Why? They have not developed a symbiotic relationship with their members. They meet present, felt needs through various programs and services. But they have not touched the early imprints in a way that builds loyalty. Like a bank that offers a "teaser" rate on a credit card, people will sign up but are unlikely to establish a long-term relationship. (Most people will pay higher interest rates if they feel like they have a relationship with a bank). Programs cannot replace code. Programs must be designed to serve the code of the church.

Likewise, churches that only touch the early imprints end up "preaching to the choir". They attract and retain the same people, but experience no growth. They miss the fact that many un-churched folks don't share the same imprints. In other words, church codes are often too narrowly defined – they don't create a bridge to the code of the surrounding culture. In effect, your church needs to bridge several codes – the American code, the Seattle code, the Sammamish Hills code, the mainline Protestant code, and the Lutheran code. If your code were exclusively Lutheran, you would attract and retain Lutherans, but be largely ineffective at reaching out to those who don't have a Lutheran background. If you were to be exclusively "Seattle", you may attract throngs of un-churched people, but never attract Lutherans.

The Dimensions of Code

Code comes in pairs. Every archetype should be understood as having two dimensions – a dominant aspect and a recessive dimensions. They are intertwined. For example, Americans are obsessed with being thin. Thin is associated with being rich and successful, just like the movie stars. Isn't it ironic that America is the fattest country on earth? Our obsession with being thin is the very thing that makes us fat. Why do the all-you-can-eat buffets appeal more to the poor than the rich? When we fail, we eat. Eating, for Americans, is about success. Again, this is unique to the American code. If the dominant aspect becomes too extreme, we will find the recessive aspect coming out in unhealthy ways. This ends up creating crises or conflicts. Much of the current fight against obesity focuses on the eating itself, or the health risks. This won't bring about much change, because eating and health are not the issues. The preoccupation with success is the issue. It is symbolically

expressed through food. In the case of SHLC, you have dominant aspects and recessive aspects for your code. It will be critical to work toward balancing these.

Cracking the Code of SHLC

Through a series of interviews and focus groups, I asked questions that were designed to produce symbolic responses. Through symbols and metaphors, we can begin to understand your church's code. I asked a variety of questions, designed to produce primarily emotional or metaphorical responses (with the exception of the opening question). When responses to different kinds of questions begin to have some degree of correspondence, we begin to find that elements of code.

I conducted four focus groups – one with young professionals (representing the demographics of the surrounding community), one with church leadership, one with newcomers to the church, and one with longer term members. Each group had approximately 8-9 participants. The participants were all white. About 50% of them were transplants to the community. The vast majority were raised in a church context – with most having some connection to Lutheranism (either themselves personally, or their spouse).

Let's take a look at some of the responses and themes to the various questions. Key words are underlined in the "theme" sections.

Question: What drew you to this church?

Summary of responses: comfortable, humor, middle of the road, looking for a safe place, personal connection, ability of pastor to relate, connected to people, programs for children, lack of high mass, felt different, could relate to it, friendliness, important for my kids to learn what I learned, traditions, multi-generational, sense of freedom, diversity, involved, Lutheran, connected to the men's group, felt comfortable, got pregnant – need a place to raise my kids, wanted my kids to know more than I did when I was growing up, friendly people, Lutheran, it was small. Lutheran. Place to raise my kids.

Themes:

Participants were primarily driven to find a place to raise their kids – because that is what church is about for them. Most of them went to church as kids and were taught that this is the thing to do – especially in the year formative years. For most, being Lutheran was quite important. They value the traditions and the balanced, middle of the road, style. When they got to SHLC, they found a place that felt familiar – like family. They found a place where they could connect and bond to others. For the most part, church is perceived to be about raising kids, and finding a place to belong.

Question: Tell me about your favorite movie.

Summary of responses: We Were Soldiers, Gone with the Wind, It's a Wonderful Life, Casablanca, Pride and Prejudice, A Knight's Tale, A River Runs Through It, Rocky, The Parent Trap, True Lies, Blazing Saddles, Old School, Field of Dreams, Dumb and Dumber, Caddyshack, Lifeboat, Thornbirds, Bullet, Great Escape, Lord of the Rings, Princess Bride, Blues Brothers, Office Space, Glory, Pretty Woman, Fried Green Tomatoes, Lord of the Rings, What about Bob?, Planes Trains Automobiles, The Piano, Miracle on 34th Street, Charlie Brown Christmas

Themes:

There was an unusually high number of comedies mentioned. Most comedies are forms of escape – getting away from it all. When life gets hard, Americans look for an escape. After all, we were founded by a group of people who “escaped” from England. For Americans, fun is what allows us to escape from the realities of life – the bills, the job, the pain of relationships, the never-ending tasks that consumer us. The type of comedy is personal preference, but comedy has always been juxtaposed to tragedy. That's an imprint that has carried through civilization from the time of the Greco-Roman era. In addition to the comedies mentioned, some of the films related to “breaking the rules” – another expression of escape. This could be breaking social rules, breaking family rules, or challenging expectations.

Many of the films mentioned have a premise that is based on the individual overcoming something – overcoming external adversity or internal adversity (personal demons). There is a spirit of triumph over something else in many of these films. This is consistent with the

American archetype of “rags to riches”, “no pain, no gain”, “if at first you don’t succeed” and so many other pithy statements that have been ingrained in us as Americans. From Rocky to Pretty Woman, we see the self-made hero. As in A Knight’s Tale, we overcome societal rules. You won’t find this archetype in many other cultures around the world. For example, the Japanese have no real sense of “overcoming adversity”. Their culture is all based on getting it right the first time as a team – perfection out the gate. Japan has very little tolerance for individualism or for the notion of overcoming.

The third theme that emerged is the romantic theme of connecting. Connecting to a lost love. Connecting to family. Connecting to history. Connecting to friends. When Kevin Costner plays ball with his dad in that corn field in Iowa, he connects to something that is lost, a family member, and history all at once. Same thing with It’s a Wonderful Life and Gone With the Wind. Fried Green Tomatoes is about finding yourself as you connect with others. This church has a strong connection to romantic ideals that life will work out if we can simply connect, rather than remain in isolation.

Question: In what activities do you feel most alive, most fully yourself?

Summary of responses: Fly-fishing, horseback riding, fishing, camping, being in the wilderness, being in nature, traveling with my job (and competing in my job), singing, cooking, basketball, walking in the woods, boogie boarding in the ocean, downhill skiing, gardening, hiking, travel / exploration, rowing, fly-fishing, cleaning, music, singing, hiking, singing, going into the mountains, sailing, being in the water or in the mountains, music, anything in nature.

Themes:

Most of the activities are about taking us away (from the drudgery of every-day life – getting out into the wilderness. People are compelled to escape the realities of life for a few hours. They feel most alive, interestingly, outside of where they spend the majority of their time. This is not true in most cultures.

Many of the activities have a “challenge” or “risk” component to them – without having to rely on someone else. We want to know that we can overcome the moguls on the slopes, beat the competition, and catch the right wave – on our own.

Most of the activities also give us a sense of perspective. We feel safe when we are in awe of something else. When they see the mountains or wade in the stream, they are reminded that they are small—and being small feels safe. We know that we’re not in charge of the world. This is also a deeply spiritual reality. But it is also an early childhood imprint. We associate being small (as children) with being safe (someone is going to take care of me). Several people said that “despite the clouds and rain here, I have hope. I know what is behind the clouds.”

Question: What was your earliest experience of church?

Summary of responses: Is it over yet? Putting my head in mom’s lap. I had to go – my parents were strict about this. I was taught that it’s the right thing to do. It’s simply what we did. I didn’t know what it was all about. I was scared of the pastor. It was like a museum. It was cold and dark and formal. I didn’t pay much attention to it. We’d play communion at home. I was a shepherd in a play. I loved the plays and the music. It was a family thing, we went to grandparents house for breakfast and then sat together in church. Children weren’t welcome. Felt like an outsider. Didn’t know what was expected. The women and children were on the left, the men were on the right. Beautiful building. Felt welcomed. I was scared to death. I had no concept of church. I was humiliated – couldn’t go to the restroom and wet myself. My church was literally most of my family with a few others. I had to wear a diaper on my head when I forgot my hat. I had to recite a verse in front of everyone – I froze and it has impacted me ever since. I always got in trouble.

Themes:

Church was perceived to be something that you had to do as a child. It is associated with strictness, but it is also associated with “doing the right thing” (for no apparent reason). It was perceived as a necessary evil for being a child. For most, being with family was the only positive thing about church. It was often a humiliating experience. For some, the humiliation haunts them to this day. This is often the same phenomenon that occurs in abusive

relationships. We stay in the relationship because we think we deserve it. People have returned to church, often because it is perceived as a “should”.

Although church itself was not always a positive experience for your people, the family associations made it safer. Mom and dad were there. Grandparents were there. There was a routine about it that made it safe.

For some, church as an exclusive club. Not all are welcome.

Those who had positive experiences were primarily the ones who felt involved in the church – through music or plays. Those who had negative experiences weren't included or welcomed. They were disconnected.

Question: How was church different for you as a teen?

Summary of responses: Youth group was fun – it was our own thing. Confirmation was boring. I wanted what my Mormon neighbor had – her church had lots of youth activities. I stopped going to church. I don't remember church during those years. Our church was geared toward older people. I wanted to do other stuff. Church interfered with my activities. I had no connections there. Our pastor thought he was hip, but he really wasn't. I went to Young Life – that was more fun. It wasn't a faith thing, it's just that our church didn't offer the youth anything. I felt left out. Church was my life. I was involved in singing. I wasn't involved and was told I wasn't a Christian. Missions trips as a youth changed my world. Social activities, going to the beach. It was like an inquisition – I had to answer 2 hours of questions by the Council. I wanted to go, but parents wouldn't take me. The pastor complimented me in front of everyone. I wasn't accepted for trying to explore other ideas.

Themes:

By their teen years, church was largely irrelevant. Again, it is perceived to be about children. Kind of like Santa Claus – it is a tradition that we want to pass on to the next generation. But by the time we come of age, it has nothing for us. Those who were in a church that offered them something received a powerful message – “you are important, church is relevant for you, it will make you a better person, you will find a place to belong”. But for the most part, people felt disconnected from the church during their teen years – “we have nothing to offer

you, you must pass the test (exclusion again), you are left out, you must think like us". They had gone through the rites of passage as a child and were now onto other things in life. Church was perceived as irrelevant to them. During the teen years, they were not as closely linked with their parents. Differentiation started to occur – and the church was linked to that differentiation. If church is about children, and we are no longer children, then church must not be about us.

Your Code

The code of Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church should be understood in pairs (dominant and recessive). These pairs, to some extent, represent both the Lutheran church and the Seattle culture. Ideally, you want these to be in a state of tension within the church. When there is no tension, they are out of balance. This does not allow for organizational growth and maturity. It is interesting that the "Lutheran" side of each pair tends to be emphasized more than the "Seattle" side. Think of the Lutheran side as the "dominant" aspect and the Seattle side as the "recessive" aspect of your code. What this means is that if the Lutheran side remains too dominant, you will continue to attract Lutherans but become largely irrelevant to others (Seattle). You may even lose Lutherans who are closely linked to the Seattle code. Currently, your members are in balance with the code – but the church, as an organization, is not. This provides a tremendous opportunity because members will not have much resistance to creating more balance.

For your church to have a clear sense of identity, and to be successful in its mission, the pairs need to be brought into better balance. The following are the primary archetypes present in your church (dominant first, recessive second):

- ❖ Conformity and Escape
- ❖ Identification and Individualism
- ❖ Safety and Challenge

Let's explore these in depth.

Conformity and Escape

Many of your congregants had negative experiences with church as a child. Church was about rules, about keeping quiet. They experienced no freedom in church – an emotional imprint. Most of them are also drawn to the outdoors – a symbol of freedom. Freedom from routine. Freedom from the cubicle at work. Freedom from the pressures of life. Part of the American code is the pioneering spirit – getting away from it all. Your members want to escape. America has always valued the frontier – from settling the west, to Star Trek's last frontier, to starting your own business, to watching a meaningless movie. Freedom, for your members, is expressed in recreation and fun. This is what the Northwest is all about! It was amazing how many favorite movies were cited just because they were fun! They represent an escape. Freedom from reality!

But for your congregation, they did not experience freedom in their early church experiences. Church was something they had to do. It was required. Why? Because their parents had been required to go to church and this was something that you just did.

While “escape” and “freedom” are part of your members’ code, they perceive church as being the other side of the coin – conformity. For most, church is a rite of passage for children. It teaches them what is moral. It teaches them the difference between right and wrong and how to obey the rules. It gives them a “solid” foundation. But by the time they are teenagers, “conformity” yields to “escape”. They find escape in Seattle, but not in church. And church is no longer a part of the equation until the kids grow up and start their own families – and then bring conformity back in to the mix.

This duality is part of the code of the members of Sammamish Hills. It will be important in years to come to begin bringing a better balance to these two sides of the coin. Escape and conformity must be expressed as part of each age, each stage in life. If children do not experience “freedom” in the church, they will go elsewhere to find it when they become teens. And when they want conformity as an adult, they will come back to the church. In addition, as long as parents see church as being primarily about children, they remain out of balance. They unconsciously shift responsibility (escape) for their own growth and spiritual development. In some cases, they may even shift the responsibility of their children's spiritual development. Thus, SHLC may be well-advised to raise the expectations and bar for parents.

Identification and Individualism

Individualism and identification (connecting with others) have long been a part of American culture. America is the land of individual expression – from the First Amendment to the small business owner to the mountain climber. At the same time, we have more standardized hotel and restaurant chains than any country in the world. Why? We want to identify and connect with others. We watch the same movies and TV shows so that we can be “included” in the discussions at school or work on Monday morning.

Members feel most alive when they are accomplishing something by themselves. They value the self-made hero. They love being out in nature. This is Seattle. But the only mention of individuality in the church came in references to “diversity” (which is interesting in an all white, primarily upper-middle class congregation). Even in the diversity, there is more “connecting” than people realize. But for the most part, individuality has no association with church. When people began to express any sense of individualism in their early church experience, they were slapped on the hand or worse. They were made to feel like outcasts. They learned that the only way to experience church was by repressing any sense of individualism. While they don’t experience the current church negatively, there was virtually no association of “individualism” and church.

SHLC is associated much more with identification than individualism. It is a place to belong. It is a place to connect to God, to bond with others. Your traditions represent identification. Your church provides a place to be centered and rejuvenated. This is a very positive thing. But SHLC needs to provide a deeper sense of individual identity within this context. It is a place for family and relationships. But it is not really perceived as a place to learn and develop individually. Be very careful with this. There is an appropriate level of identification – with the stories we tell, the inside jokes, the traditions. But too much identification makes newcomers feel like outsiders. You do a nice job of explaining the order of worship on Sundays – and how things work. There is very little sense of exclusion in your church – even for outsiders. But for those who are not from a liturgical tradition, there will be little sense of identification in the traditions that provide identification for insiders. You may want to consider how to create more identification with the broader community. Paradoxically, this may come through a great emphasis on individual expression and growth. Again, these are

not opposites – but two side of the same coin. An individual finds herself most completely by identifying with others. And community is most healthy when individuals are healthy.

Safety and Challenge

People want a sense of significance – that they have accomplished something great. At the same time, they want that balanced by a sense of safety. Your members want to beat the odds. They want to conquer the mountain. They want to beat the competition. They want to overcome. At the same time, they want to feel safe. They want the warmth of childhood. They want to feel protected.

In your situation, people feel safe. They don't experience much of the negativity that is associated with church as a child or a teen. Even more significantly, they see church as about "family" – an extension of how they perceived church early in life. This is a very safe place. That archetype needs to be reinforced. But the other side of the coin seems to be largely off the radar. There is very little association of your church with "overcoming".

Your church should set the bar high – spiritually, relationally, physically, financially, and emotionally. The challenge is that your members do not perceive that this is what church is all about. The tendency is to revert to what we associate with church – a safe place – rather than seeing it as about challenge.

Your Code is a Package Deal

Your members perceive church as about conformity, identification, and safety. They also perceive that escape, individualism, and overcoming are outside of the church. As a result, it will be very difficult to introduce one element without the other three. For example, you will probably not be successful in challenging the church as a whole. Challenge is associated with individualism. For example, if you tried to launch a challenging discipleship initiative within your church on a collective (connecting) level, it would probably fail. My sense is that the church has tried to emphasize escape, challenge, and individualism in the past – but in isolation. If you are going to be successful in tapping into the code of your members and prospective members, you must create something that captures all three simultaneously. The coffee company, for example, couldn't say "we have the best-tasting product on the

market and oh, by the way, it smells good". I'm not suggesting that you abandon conformity, connection, and safety. But you must consider how to introduce the other three in a totally new way – perhaps outside of the formal structures of the church. (My sense, by the way, is that there is probably more balance now than there was several years ago. The church is making progress!)

Communication, Media, and Code – Implications for Your Church

As you consider balancing your code, you will need to pay careful attention to the media for communicating the recessive elements of your code. For example, in the American psyche, newspapers are associated with credibility and exclusion. Dad wanted time and space to read the paper when we were kids. Television has typically been associated with family time. We all sit down and watch TV together as a family. We may talk together while the TV is on. TV is primarily about a collective visual experience – its credibility factor is much lower than the newspaper. It's interesting that people will continue to watch TV if the sound goes off, but if the sound remains on and the picture goes off, they will turn the TV off. Radio is a secondary activity. We listen to the radio while we are doing something else – driving, writing, reading a book. At best, it is focused on a short-attention span. Movies, however, represent the American code. Virtually every successful movie captures an element of the American code – the rags to riches stories, the underdog, pioneers, self-made heroes, and so forth.

What is this guy talking about, you are wondering?

Here's an example. Sunday morning worship, for your church, is like TV. There is a basic plot (the liturgy), with different characters (people up front), commercials (announcements), and some variety. People associate this with togetherness. Sermons, for most people, are more like radio. Many people will think about something else or even do something else while the pastor is preaching (no offense, John). But for most people, sermons are secondary. That means that the primary focus of Sunday morning, based on cultural archetypes, is about being together. This would not be the place to introduce the recessive dimensions of your code. If you tried to introduce more challenging sermons, more individual expression in worship, or more freedom in the service, you would find resistance. If those elements were already strongly emphasized in your church, they would be well-received on

Sunday morning. So, you may want to think of what element of your church could be more like a movie – capturing the experiential elements that people are craving. What would it take for your members to have the same experience of your church that they do when they are hiking, skiing or boogie-boarding? What would it take for people to be able to find the kind of escape in church that they find in watching Dumb and Dumber? These are not easy questions with simple solutions. But now that you've started to discover your code, you can begin to reinforce the dominant aspects, and introduce the recessive aspects. If you are successful, you will develop a community that has unlimited potential.

Next Steps

I'd recommend that the church staff and Council take some time to process this material. But don't act on it yet. Think about it. I've included a few questions that you may want to discuss together.

1. Think about the dominant elements of your code – conformity, identification, and safety. What are the symbols or traditions within the church that represent these? For those outside of your church, and who perhaps have no church background, what are symbols or traditions that represent these elements?
2. Think about the recessive elements of your code – escape, individualism, and challenge. Ask the same questions as above. Do these indeed seem out of balance? Are the dominant elements more pervasive in your church than the recessive elements? Are they in balance or out of balance in the community?
3. Our members seem to have these six elements of code in a healthy tension, while the church as a whole has not. What are the underlying causes for this? (Consider, in particular, early childhood experiences). Which of these underlying causes do we have an ability to influence or change?
4. What elements of your code do you see represented in your buildings, facilities, and décor?

5. If the primary draw to our church is about “raising our kids in the Lutheran tradition”, then what are the implications of continuing that? How can we better balance the two elements of “rite of passage” with “a lifetime of growth”?
6. What elements of your code do you see represented in Sunday worship? Other programs and ministries?
7. What elements of your code do you see represented in the way that the church does leadership?
8. Is there a link between the code of your church, and the conflict from several years ago?
9. What needs to occur to ensure that the church doesn't lose the dominant aspects of its code in this process?
10. Brainstorm new approaches to ministry that might bring better balance within your code.