

REPORT: Learnings from (a)Spire Ministry

Presented to FCC Pasadena at the Spring 2017 Business Meeting

This report is designed to reflect feedback from (a)Spire members and those who helped to develop (a)Spire as a new ministry at First Congregational Church, Pasadena (UCC). Over its life of ministry across the last six years (a)Spire brought in 25+ new members and dozens of others who in some way participated in our ministries, and subtly influenced the focus and vision of its host church (FCC). The input reflected here below comes from 25 survey responses that were massaged into a consolidated form both by (a)Spire participants and this group, the Pastoral Relations Committee for Andy.

Those who compile this report are immensely appreciative to all the persons, organizations, and agencies who helped to initiate and sustain (a)Spire Ministry through time, talent, and financial gifts. As you see in this report, (a)Spire in its relatively short life made a difference in the lives of faiths of its members and constituents in significant and long lasting ways.

Although (a)Spire officially launched in January of 2012 and was progressing well for 2-3 years, the last two years were challenging. A significant chunk of key leaders moved away from Southern California in 2014-2015 so (a)Spire downsized a bit in January of 2016 in hopes of recovering, and then growing. But after a realistic assessment in the Fall of 2016 by the remaining (a)Spire folks, they came to the conclusion that it would not likely get to the point of sustainability any time soon and didn't have the necessary energy and passion among the group to take us there. Because we were facing even more significant budget challenges in 2017, the group decided it was best to end (a)Spire and celebrate the many successes and learnings through a couple events in November of 2016: a celebration in FCC worship and a meal and worship in the park.

(a)Spire accomplished quite a lot over the past 6 years, and truly changed lives. [Here is one video](#) from 2014 and [another](#) from 2013, two peak years that highlight some valuable testimony. Another [video from 2012](#) is also worth watching, as it shows some of the first members and early leaders.

-Pastoral Relations Committee Members (for Rev. Andy Schwiebert)
Carolyn Olney, Kim Story, Claire Richardson

(a)Spire Participant & FCC Supporter Survey Results

TAKEAWAYS:

- I have never felt freer to be myself (my WHOLE self) in a worship setting, and community setting. I came back to myself here, and have deepened my understanding of my faith and passion.
- (a)Spire broadened my experience of worship and in turn allowed me to participate more freely. The music program in particular was more contemporary and different from what I grew up with and what I experience regularly at FCC. More importantly, the congregation was more accepting to a diversity of musical styles, and I ultimately found myself playing accompaniments to pop songs that had been repurposed as songs of worship - a new experience for me. The immigration retreats were very powerful and somehow beyond the capacity of FCC to provide. I would have liked to attend some of the other field events. I enjoyed helping coordinate the science and faith small group and hearing others discuss their opinions on the subject. As a coordinator I had to think a lot about what I thought was relevant to discuss, and I feel like I got more out of it than the participants.
- A closer relationship to God and kinship with others that I met in (a)Spire. (a)Spire completely immersed me in a comfortable nurturing environment to explore my relationship with God and eventually become baptized.
 - I think that the closeness of our community has been a great support and blessing to me. I already miss the weekly opportunity to pray together. Our small groups were also a great help in growing my faith, as I think that such growth is best done in community.
- Almost certainly my take away of that experience, was a new found understanding of the extraordinary difficulty of beginning and maintaining a new ministry. However, engaging w/ (a)Spire also taught me that ministries which include a component of social justice as a form of discipleship are direly needed w/in Christian communities. In an era where political and religious polarization dominate discourse, a ministry that challenges believers to demonstrate their gratitude for God's love in Jesus by humbly serving others, helps to remind us that the "other" whatever his or her religious, philosophical, political beliefs, is no less deserving of our best. The experience of discernment, planning and prayer that gave birth to (a)Spire, and participating in worship, and social justice practice helped solidify in my mind that choosing this path has been and continues to be one of limitless rewards.
- Felt accepted, welcomed=radical hospitality
- What we did for those who were here was life-giving
- Serving the surrounding community and social justice emphasis
- Small groups

- Non-traditional church—laid back
- Loved music and worship
- Younger people
- Freedom to explore faith & spirituality
- Sense of community & fellowship

UNIQUENESS:

- (a)Spire was interested in working out theology/faith with congregants more than any church I've been part of; (a)Spire was interested in difficult situations/discussions/activities on the margins of society (toxic tour, Tijuana visit, end-of-life small group discussion, etc)
- Very comfortable and down to earth. Welcoming in all ways and very inviting. I wanted to go to service because I would always take away something and grow spiritually; I never felt it was an obligation.
- Our truly wide welcome, and radical hospitality set us apart from other churches I have participated with.
- Collaborative leadership, decision-making
- Intimate
- Younger singles and couples (not families)
- Social justice emphasis
- Church-within-a-church model
- Openness to the unknown; willingness to experiment & learn

CELEBRATIONS:

- Small groups are what I want to celebrate! In fact, I moved away from Pasadena and in my new church community I lead another small group immediately after I joined. It helped me connect to my new church community, I felt, in a faster manner than if I hadn't done it. Small groups are so wonderful because you can become intimate with your beliefs with people you trust. It truly helps the spiritual growth process.
- God is still speaking to everyone and people do not need to fear ever that God is accepting of everyone's individuality and experiences. Small group experiences to allow members to grow together in their faith and share their spiritual journeys.
- I celebrate what made (a)Spire distinctive from other ministries I've experienced...I would carry forth the willingness to experiment and take chances with new ideas with what worship means in today's society.
- What I wish to celebrate and carry w/me in my interactions w/ other believers is the idea (that (a)SPire practiced) that God is not a fixed constant that we can ever fully understand. Meaning that we are free to continue to seek, explore, and imagine God in

a variety of ways and in a myriad of contexts. And from that exploration realize new ways of experiencing God and revealing our faith.

- The best parts of (a)Spire for me were our outreach to the local homeless community and our small groups. I hope to see both continue in some capacity in the larger FCC context. FCC already has great outreach programs, and we have also been seeing some growth in the small group capacity. I think that (a)Spire folks ought to consider leading some FCC small groups, as the connections made in those groups are often what get outside people
- Couches
- There's no "one right way" of doing worship
- A connection to people who are homeless in our community
- Mission statement-centered
- God is not fixed/static
- Collaborative, flat leadership (not so exclusively reliant on pastoral leader)
- Diversity (earlier on in our development; less so later on)

DISLIKES:

- The only thing that did not work for me in (a)Spire was my constant fear/perception that it was struggling for sustainability. Part of the beauty and reach of (a)Spire is that it reached marginalized groups of people who only finally felt comfortable to worship again in the (a)Spire community. This was beautiful. Though it also meant struggling to find regular and long-term contributors in leadership to (a)Spire, as many were also students or in a life transition. Targeted membership recruitment to people with roots/establishing roots in Pasadena would have changed this, but I'm also not sure if this would have changed the (a)Spire community dynamic and how it ended up serving its core members.
- I wish there was a greater emphasis on the vertical connection with God (relationship with Christ, etc.) I think we got the horizontal (community, reaching out to others) down great!
- Music (no notes, few hymns, not enough widely-known "go-to" songs, too much praise & worship music)
- Church-within-a-church made us feel too separate from FCC
- Too homogeneous (by the end); biggest common factor was class/education
- The pressure to evangelize
- A perception that it's struggling, unlikely to reach sustainability
- Time of day (1 pm was a difficult time to gather for worship)
- Income of members was not enough to sustain
- Intimacy & touchy-feely nature
- Sermons sometimes didn't work; might try other forms

FCC LEARNINGS FROM (a)SPIRE:

- Since (a)Spire started I've seen a willingness in FCC to try new things in worship, in some cases ostensibly to "attract (a)Spire members" to them - ex the 9 am summer breakfast services.
- I would hope that the FCC community has gotten a small glimpse of new ways of doing things. FCC is a progressive community in a lot of ways, but a very traditional and conservative community in a lot of other ways. That comes with the territory of being an older church that has been doing things a certain way for a long time. The (a)Spire community would hopefully be a sort of forewarning, however, that the current way of doing things cannot continue 'as is' forever. It's commendable that the FCC community recognized that enough to form something like (a)Spire; but ultimately, the different nature of something like (a)Spire is something that needs to be incorporated into the congregation as a unified whole.
- Willingness to try new things
- Reaching out to younger people
- It was overly dependent on \$ from FCC sources; never able to reach sustainability
- Exposed our own practices (as changeable)
- Demonstrated a community that is primarily geared to touch peoples lives and not overly focused on the building or budget

ANDY'S GIFTS:

- Andy demonstrated an ability to conceive of a new ministry and lead a team of volunteers to collaboratively execute. He led the visioning and conceptualization (including gathering input from the greater Pasadena community), worship design and planning, and staffing. He oversaw every aspect of the worship implementation and outside-worship activities. He got people excited about being a part of a new ministry, including a few regulars at FCC who were not particularly engaged there. He was an effective communicator and interface to the FCC senior staff, Council and congregation.
- I got the impression from square one that Andy cared deeply for the congregation. I recall being invited out for coffee shortly after first visiting (a)Spire, and felt immediately that Andy was interested in my faith journey and interested in how (a)Spire could support and facilitate that. I also appreciated Andy's willingness to push our progressive community into areas that were challenging for us. His Easter sermon in 2014 (I think?) was a beautiful account of encounter he had with God that was all at once challenging and inspiring. Andy was a good leader in that he modeled what it was to be a caring member of the community willing to share his own journey in order to help people along in theirs.
- Warm, open, hospitality, personable, approachable, relatable
- Inviting people out to coffee (almost immediately)
- Vision
- Social justice values (and experience in labor/immigration—with the language and stories that come with that)

- Relatable sermons
- Delegating and open to flat leadership
- Openness/Willingness to do self & community assessment

ANDY'S GROWING EDGES (AND OTHERS'):

- I don't know. I thought Andy was awesome. It somehow attracted a lot of people in transition in life (students, people exploring their careers, etc.) which resulted in everyone moving away. I think the church was almost targeting that population. Unfortunately, there were not enough people who were actually committed to staying in the Pasadena area.
- I think targeted service activities with higher probability of meeting potential members to grow (a)Spire to sustainability might have been something I would have advocated for, but I'm still not convinced this would have been more effective.
- Preaching—needed more frequent alternatives to traditional reflection/homily
- Could have encouraged spiritual growth and more faith sharing among members

OTHER COMMENTS:

- a(S)pire was a good experience and something that FCC can be proud of. We can feel sad that it won't be here, but perhaps we can use some of the best parts. Andy's ability to organize, lead and relate to new people, especially younger individuals and families is an asset for FCC.
- Wonderful ministry, wonderful folks who participated - I am deeply grateful for the experience with (a)Spire over the last 6 years
- Several FCC folks want to see some (a)Spire-ish elements retained