

**CENTRAL BAPTIST CHURCH
JAMESTOWN, RHODE ISLAND**

SELF-STUDY, 2006

On October 31, 2005, Dr. Robert Morton-Ranney concluded a long, highly successful and much appreciated ministry at the Central Baptist Church. During his seventeen-year pastorate, the congregation prospered in each succeeding year through increase of numbers, stronger finances, growth in ministry areas such as wider mission, and most recently, through a comprehensive reconstruction and expansion of the church's physical facilities completed in the fall of 2004. To guide its efforts in seeking our next pastor, the Pastoral Search Committee elected to devote roughly six months to a careful self-study of the church, results of which are presented here.

"A church," as one CBC member puts it, "is a community of people who come together to share in the worship of God." To understand better what kind of community we are, in what ways we come together, and how we engage in common worship, the CBC Pastoral Search committee has conducted conversations in a variety of settings with most of the church's active members and participants over the past six months. In all, focused conversations have been conducted with over 85 individuals, and opportunity for such conversations was offered to all. Further comments were received through discussions at a 'movable feast' in January, and through discussion during an Adult Class session. The following is a summary of the major themes the Committee has gathered from these conversations.

➤ ***CBC as a community***

If there is a single theme we CBCers share most frequently, it is that CBC is a warm and inviting community. Over and over we note, typically as a first and unprompted thought, that our sense of community is distinctive, and unusually prominent by contrast to our experiences with other churches. Several spoke of a first impression of CBC in worship – of an engaged, relaxed warmth that seemed very inviting – or, as a first-time visitor, of being sought out at coffee hour for conversation and welcome. "CBC exudes acceptance and openness," was one typical comment.

One of us noted that the announcements at the beginning of the service made clear from her first visit that CBC is a congregation-run church – lay people are engaged in and responsible for the church's activities, and although the pastor leads the Sunday worship, this congregation expects much of itself. This feature of CBC stood diametrically opposite to her prior experience in Roman Catholic parishes. Another commented, "This church has always been about people, not the minister." Yet another noted that "CBC is my home away from home."

Not only is CBC a warm church community, it is also, as many pointed out, "a true community church." Our physical location at the heart of an island-bound village [see [*Jamestown Profile*](#), below] is one contributing factor no doubt (though a number of us live off-island, and some have attended from as far as an hour away), but so too is our tradition of openness.

➤ *Soul Liberty*

Almost as universally affirmed in our conversations as ‘community’ is the centrality at CBC of the Baptist tradition of soul liberty. This congregation pays special recognition to the fact that participants come from at least 28 different denominational backgrounds, that all of us are in different points on our own particular spiritual journeys, and that there is no one ‘right way’ that any of us may impose upon any others.

At the same time, we choose to support one another even as we differ, not with tepid tolerance, but with engagement and mutual support. As one of us noted: “I like that we are able to get along with our differences.” Another longtime member put it this way: “How would I learn anything if everyone believed the same thing I did?” [*For a specific discussion of this support for diversity of views, see also the [Deacons’ Statement on Iraq Concerns](#), below*].

Many of those who have found their way to CBC have had experiences with other (notably creedal) denominations that were less than positive. For some, demands for orthodoxy of belief, behavioral conformity, anxiety and guilt in such settings have led to extended periods among the ‘unchurched’.

By contrast, our shared worship emphasizes a different religious tonality, whether expressed by the lifelong Baptist who feels that “as Christians, we should pat ourselves on the back a bit more”, by another member who says, “My God builds me up!”, or by another who rejects “the pernicious blasphemy of trying to measure the goodness of God with a yardstick of human sinfulness -- God does not love us because we sin, or because we feel guilt, or because we repent; God loves us, and thank God, that is enough.”

Many of us have found particularly helpful the benediction our last pastor used regularly: “Don’t ever be ashamed of your understanding of your faith. Give of yourself and love the world, for Christ’s sake.”

➤ *Open Table*

Implicit in these two points, it follows that CBC’s monthly communion table is open to all. In some instances, guest clergy officiating on our communion Sunday (the first Sunday of each month) have used language of invitation to communion suggesting that only those who believe, or who consider themselves Christian, or who are members of the Church, or who meet some other vague test, are welcome to participate in the communion. When such language has been used, it has been received as very jarring in this Church – our understanding and practice is that at this table, all are welcome – whatever their beliefs or understandings, their doubts or traditions or fears or unbelief – all are welcome.

Similarly, formal membership is not a requirement of participation in any area of church life at CBC. According to our constitution and bylaws, nonmembers vote at business meetings, hold committee positions, and participate without impediment in worship. Membership, when undertaken, represents no more or less than a decision to affiliate with CBC over an extended period of time, and to affirm that decision publicly.

➤ *Liturgy and Music*

Worship at CBC does not reflect a particular fastidiousness about liturgy, though a certain degree of respectful decorum is observed.

As the church wrestled with the decision to expand the sanctuary, the question of moving from one to two services on Sunday morning was raised, but not widely supported because of the fragmentation of the congregation that might result.

Music is often mentioned, and when mentioned, is unanimously viewed as a very important and positive aspect of our worship, by choir and non-choir members alike. In particular, we have especially welcomed the diversity of styles in the musical offerings.

One notes: “Music is very important to me – it has an impact in a different way than preaching.” Another: “Once I hear the organ, I know I’m home.” Another couple leaves no doubt: “We’re here for the music.”

➤ *Preaching*

There is a range of views in the congregation with respect to how closely sermons should hew to Biblical material. A majority favor “sermons that make me think”, “messages that feed me”, “something to chew on” and the like. Perhaps the desire for “intellectual” sermons reflects the prevalence at CBC of, as one of us put it, “professionals in the slow lane.” On the other hand, a noticeable minority expresses a desire for preaching somewhat closer to Biblical texts.

These two contrasting viewpoints perhaps reflect a dynamic tension for all of us between sacred experience as received, on the one hand, from without – whether from sacred texts, from others, or from a transcendent God – versus that perceived, on the other, as a still, small voice within. In our diversity and allegiance to soul liberty, CBC explores this tension in an engaged and shared conversation with received Christian texts.

Short sermons, not surprisingly, are preferred.

➤ *Religious Education*

CBC provides religious education in adult discussions at 11 on Sundays, and in a Sunday School program for children, currently held concurrently with the Sunday morning service. Comments on the adult discussions are favorable, though members of the choir have felt excluded because of conflicting rehearsals. [*for a sampling of recent programs, see [Adult Education](#), below*]

Many are concerned about shrinking numbers in the Sunday School. In part, this shrinkage reflects the decline in the town of families with school age children. The CBC Sunday School is particularly affected, though, because numbers are small to begin with and because visiting children can easily overwhelm efforts to build continuity from week to week. This is an area in which a new pastor could offer useful suggestion.

One of us reminds us that “religious education [of our children] is the hope for our future.”

Another venue for religious education – both for those who participate and for their audience – is offered in the theatrical productions of the CBC Players, which explore ‘moral dilemmas, questions of faith, and the conflicts that face us in our everyday lives.’ Past productions include *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, *Godspell*, *Inherit the Wind*, and *The Enchanted April*.

➤ **Pastoral Care**

Another area of concern we mention fairly frequently, particularly in connection with the search for a pastor, is pastoral care and its ‘subacute’ version, spiritual nurture. Those mentioning these areas see room for development here for CBC. More than one of us identifies these roles as more critical for a new pastor even than preaching – one describes this role as a “pastorate in the shadows.”

Many of us note increased numbers of retired people at CBC, mostly younger retirees, but looking ahead toward gradually limiting aging issues.

At the same time, some were uncomfortable with an overemphasis on pastoral visitations, feeling that while such support should be available to those who request it, it should never be intrusive.

Also, some felt that pastoral care should involve both pastor and congregation, operating in particular through the Shepherds, CBC’s lay group for pastoral ministry.

➤ **Community Care**

Through Community Care, formerly the Wider Mission Committee, our resources are focused beyond the congregation itself. The CCC provides a vehicle for us as a congregation to be involved in and support relief efforts, charitable and social work. The CCC seeks to provide a balance among local, national and international projects; and between commitments that are primarily financial and those that are more demanding of volunteer time and effort. Since 2004, CCC has committed to sending 20 people to summer work projects among people in need in western Maine. Every other year, CCC also sends five people for a week to La Romana in the Dominican Republic to provide medical and construction support to the Good Samaritan Hospital, a project endorsed among other organizations by the American Baptist Churches of Rhode Island.

A few of us express concern about CBC’s support of some projects, either because they appear to invoke negative stereotypes of overseas ‘missionary’ evangelism, or because they are not locally based in Jamestown (‘charity begins at home’), or because they do not reflect unanimity in their appropriateness as ‘CBC-related’. Another specific, though also infrequent objection arises in the specific context of partial travel subsidies for work trip participants – why go, is the question, when you could just send the money?

To these objections, others of us counter by noting (in addition to the Biblical injunctions to service) the life-changing character of these activities for the participants (most noticeably the

teens involved), the renewed vigor and commitment of many participants to church-related activity upon their return, and the fact that most of the funds supporting these efforts comes from the CCC-run Christmas Fair.

On balance, it would seem that many (perhaps most) of us are, as one put it: “glad and supportive of the fact that these activities are being done, even if I personally do not choose to participate.”

➤ *Fellowship*

As warm a community as CBC is, and as congregationally active, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that many of us mention a need or desire for more fellowship opportunities. Potluck suppers, movie nights, Bible study groups, men’s groups, youth coffee houses, ping-pong, games night – all of these ideas are mentioned even nostalgically in many of our conversations.

One observation that may explain some of these comments is the shifting demographic profile of the church itself and of the wider town – many more of us are now in post-childrearing years that was true even five years ago in Jamestown, and for those families with children at home, competing time demands are encroaching even on what used to be ‘sacrosanct’ Sunday mornings. Whatever the explanation, this is another area of challenge and creative opportunity for CBC during the next pastorate.

➤ *A New Pastor*

Beyond the observations above, offering as they do some points of considerable diversity and others of near-unanimity, we are rather unspecific as to characteristics a new pastor should possess. A few have expressed a preference for a pastor of one gender or the other, of one generation or another. In general, though, such preferences do not appear to be deeply held, nor are they widely expressed. Rather, personal qualities, spiritual depth, intelligence, warmth and skills in ministry appear to matter much more for us, though we have difficulty finding words to capture these qualities in precise measure. Remarks of three of us will have to stand in for the rest: ‘not narrow’, ‘someone practical, not pious’ and ‘someone young at heart’ summarize well many of these more elusive attributes.

- We look for someone to preach and pray with us, from and to the experiences we share.
- We look for someone to encourage and support us as we carry out our leadership responsibilities for the life of this church.
- We look for someone to welcome all into this church and its communion table, without precondition or reservation, and with deep respect for the many paths God grants to those who seek God’s presence.
- We look for someone to stand with us in our joys and troubles, to live among us and share in our common life and worship, and with deepest joy an open heart can offer, to remind us of God’s presence and love for us all.

Appendices:

A. Adult Education, 2005-2006

Date	Topic	Presenter	Attd.
September 11	Ice Cream Social	Deacons	
September 18	Discussion of Play	CBC Players	12
September 25	Robert's Program	Dr.Robert Morton-Ranney	20
October 2	Opening the Door and Being More	T.Fasano/G.Glanville	16
October 9	Columbus Day Weekend	No Program	
October 16	Energy and the Environment	Tom Wiggin	14
October 23	Jamestown Land Trust	D.Bates/Q.Anthony	10
October 30	Robert's Goodbye	Congregation	
November 6	Pastoral Search	Dr. Rasmussen, ABCORI	12
November 13	Veteran's Day Program	Prof. Tracie Shea, Brown Univ.	10
November 20	Pastoral Search	N.Bancroft/ ABCORI	5
November 27	Pastoral Search	Dr. Rasmussen, ABCORI	10
December 4	Pastoral Search	Dr. Rasmussen, ABCORI	10
December 11	Mwea, Kenya Project	Janet Larson	12
December 18	Women's Religious Roles in History	Susan Murray	15
December 25	Christmas Vacation		
January 1	Christmas Vacation		
January 8	A Lively Experiment/John Clarke	Nancy Cyr-Larson	20
January 15	Women of the Civil Rights Movement	Jim Traer	20
January 22	CBC Self Study	Pastoral Search Comm.	25
January 29	World House/ MLK's Nobel Prize Speech	Tom Wiggin	8
February 5	Bullying In Our Schools and Beyond	Mary Wright	25
February 12	Helping Neighbors in Need/ EBCAP	Adult Education Board	
February 19	School Vacation		
February 26	School Vacation		
March 5	Maine Mission Trip	Janet Larson/ Joy Oosterbaan	14
March 12	Fair Trade; Ethical Shopping	Tom Wiggin	12
March 19	Legacy of John Clarke:1606-1676	Nancy Cyr-Larson	19
March 26	Finding Darwin's God	Prof. Kenneth Miller; Brown Univ.	65
April 2	Acknowledging Human Trafficking	Tom Wiggin	18
April 9	Book Discussion/ The Kite Runner	Maribeth Traer	12
April 16	Easter		
April 23	Chernobyl: Twenty Years Later	John Andrews	9
April 30	Mission Trip to La Romana	Attendees	
May 7	Helping Neighbors in Need/ EBCAP	Christian Ed. Board (resched.)	
May 14	Mother's Day/Sunday School Presentation	Sunday School	

B. Deacons' Statement on Iraq Concerns

The following statement was adopted by the Board of Deacons on March 9, 2003, at the beginning of the war in Iraq:

The developing question of war over Iraq in recent weeks has forced most Americans to confront deeply conflicting claims to their loyalty. Many – on both sides of the question – act from a sense of deep consistency in their understandings of the claims of faith and patriotism; while for others, these claims intersect in a host of bewildering, challenging, and even deeply disturbing ways. – For some, in other words, the contest of views is external and interpersonal; for others it is mainly internal.

How shall this church, with its tradition of soul liberty, respond to the depth and urgency of these conflicting views, especially where they present themselves as compelling matters of conscience?

One path that some churches take is to become communities of the like-minded, through more or less conscious, more or less subtle ostracism of those who believe differently. There is soul in these churches – perhaps – but no liberty.

Another path calls itself toleration, but conceals a deliberate avoidance of conversation about things that most deeply matter. In such churches, there is more or less conscious, more or less subtle ostracism – not of those who believe differently – but of those who believe passionately. In these churches there may be liberty of a sort, but no soul.

As deacons of this congregation, we feel called to affirm the course of this church along a different path. We acknowledge our commitment, within the tradition of this church, to welcome, encourage, and actively support one another in our diverse journeys of faith and witness – even and especially where those journeys take opposed directions. We undertake this commitment:

- as an assurance of the liberty we espouse;
- as a direct, learning step in the making of peace; and
- by the grace of conviction in the embrace of a God who loves and beckons us, each by a distinctive path, to God's self.

C. Financial Indicators

	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
Pledge	\$ 83,462	\$ 89,966	\$ 87,999
Plate	5,588	4,663	4,538
Other	14,448	16,825	24,445
General Revenues*	\$ 103,498	\$ 111,454	\$ 116,982

** Does not include the Benevolent Fund, which provides for the activities of the Deacons and the Community Care Committee (formerly Wider Mission). Further financial information is available in the Annual Report.*

C. CBC Demographic Profile

By profession or training, CBC's active congregation breaks down roughly as follows (retirees are represented under their prior professions):

Profession	Pct
Teacher	13.5%
Engineer/Technical Professional	13.5%
Nurse	12.6%
Administrative Support	11.7%
Business	9.9%
Government	6.3%
Counseling/Psychology	5.4%
Professor	2.7%
Lawyer	2.7%
Trades	1.8%
Librarian	1.8%
Executive Administrative	1.8%
Physician	1.8%
Architect	0.9%
Clergy	0.9%
At Home/Other	12.6%
Grand Total	100.0%

D. Jamestown Profile

Jamestown is located on Conanicut Island at the mouth of Narragansett Bay. It is connected to the mainland on the west by the Jamestown Verrazzano Bridge and on the east to the city of Newport by the Pell Bridge. Jamestown offers a unique island experience with easy access to Providence 35 miles to the north.

Jamestown is approximately 10 square miles with a population of 5,662. The median age is 44. Fifty-six percent of Jamestowners hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Town government is of the council/town manager form. The town boasts two excellent schools housing nearly five hundred students in grades K-8. High school students attend nearby North Kingstown High School. Median household income is \$63,000. Jamestown has a small supermarket, pharmacy, and hardware store providing most necessities and many popular restaurants. The [Jamestown Philomenian Library](#) is a superb community resource providing library services and a place for public forums, lectures and performances. The town of Jamestown operates a municipal golf course with superb views, a recreational campsite at Fort Getty, a public beach at Mackerel Cove and a recreational center at the East Ferry. The town's recreation program provides activities for children and adults. Commercial marinas are located at both the East Ferry and West Ferry—opposite ends of Narragansett Avenue, our main street the ends of which formerly afforded ferry service.

Jamestown has an active cultural arts community. The Jamestown Community Theatre produces two plays each year. Many of the musical performances provide opportunities for all ages, often with 100 actors involved in the production. The Central Baptist Players also produce dramatic productions which are well received and attended by the community. The Jamestown Art Association provides activities and shows for the visual arts. The Historical Society operates a museum and archive of historical information. Jamestown owns a fine community piano which travels from place to place for concerts and special performances.

Jamestown has four year-round churches, Central Baptist, St. Mark Roman Catholic, St. Matthew's Episcopal, and the Jamestown Chapel non-denominational. All are active and well-attended. Quaker meeting is held during the summer months in the historic Quaker Meetinghouse.

The community boasts many diverse organizations with active calendars. [The Jamestown Press](#) is the local weekly newspaper with reporting of local events and activities. *02835* is a monthly publication about town issues and ideas.

The Conanicut Island Land Trust promotes conservation areas and easements throughout the town preserving scenic views and access. The Trust also operates the Jamestown Community Farm which raises large amounts of vegetables that are send to area food pantries. CBC contributes volunteers and financial support to the Community Farm.

E. Constitution & Bylaws and Organization

[CBC Constitution and Bylaws](#) are available on the CBC website.

F. History of Central Baptist Church

An interesting [History of Central Baptist Church](#) is available on the CBC website.

G. Contact Information

Street Address:

99 Narragansett Avenue
Jamestown, Rhode Island

Mailing Address:

Central Baptist Church
P. O. Box 295
Jamestown, RI 02835-0295

Telephone:

(401) 423-1651

Email Address:

Laurie Maguire
Administrative Assistant
CBCJamestownAdmin@verizon.net

Website:

<http://www.jamestownri.com/centralbaptist/>

Members of the Pastoral Search Committee

John Andrews, Chair
Tammy Fasano
Maggie Kozel
Norman Newberry
Marjorie Smith