2023-2024
Board of Advocates Report
Baylor Soundings Project
DESCRIPTION OF THE SOUNDINGS PROJECT

Funded by a generous grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., the Soundings Project engages churches that represent the diversity of Texas congregational life: Baptist and non-Baptist, Protestant and Catholic, rural and urban, small and large, multi-generational, multi-ethnic, and multi-socioeconomic. Through the planning and development of granted-funded ministry projects, these churches work together with Baylor to practice what it means for God to call people to lead lives of meaning and purpose.

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

COMMUNITY
Strengthen congregational life through cultivating intergenerational communities both within and between participating congregations as they explore how God calls people to live lives of meaning and purpose in all seasons and vocations.

VOCATION
Create mutually-enriching partnerships between Baylor and selected Texas congregations to reclaim and deepen a biblical understanding of vocation.

INNOVATION
Serve congregations as an "innovation hub" where they can explore ways that God might be calling them to respond creatively to complex issues and challenges.
In our endeavor to learn from the church's practical and theological reflections on vocation, we have identified these research questions as especially important:

- What language do people use when they talk about vocation (calling)?
- When describing what vocation is, do people gravitate toward certain stories from Scripture, or speak of spiritual gifts, or do they draw upon other sources?
- What elements of the church’s life together are most formative for people’s growth into understanding and living out their sense of calling?
- How might it be communicated best that all Christians have a vocation?
- How can both church leaders and members participate fully in shared reflection about matters of calling?
- How might church leaders and members better understand and communicate both the communal and individual natures of callings?
Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture 2023

This year’s most significant event for the Project was the Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture: Called Together in an Age of Discord, held on Baylor University’s campus October 25–27, 2023. The Soundings Project sponsored the event, working with Baylor’s Institute for Faith and Learning, which annually hosts the symposium.

Twenty-nine participants at the symposium were from Called to Lives of Meaning and Purpose Initiative (CLMPI) hubs besides Soundings:
In addition to this larger CLMPI representation, a total of 24 participants from 5 different Soundings congregations participated. In fact, four of the Soundings congregations presented about their projects:

- Holy Spirit Episcopal Church in Waco (represented by Fr. Jason Ingalls)
- First Baptist Church of Waco (represented in two different sessions by Drs. Matt Snowden and Joshua Hays)
- Pioneer Drive Baptist Church of Abilene (represented by Jeff Reid and Dr. John N. Davis)
- First Baptist Church of Amarillo (represented by Gary Jensen, Bill Brian, and Toana Smith)
- Dr. Howie Batson, senior pastor of First Baptist Church of Amarillo, preached at the Vesper service.

In all, there were 13 presentations related to Soundings and the CLMPI, including presentations by Dr. Jane Patterson; Dr. Roman Williams; and a presentation by Ishmael Carter and Darlene Dobbs on the project at First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, a partner of The Myrtle Collaboration.

With more than 500 total participants, the symposium was a resounding success for the Soundings Project and its partner hubs. Some of the responses received included the following:

“I feel like I have a ready source of education and guidance going forward.”

“We can use what we learned to make our church initiative better.”

“[The symposium] also helped me think more broadly about orienting vocational exploration towards the common good.”
Baylor Symposium on Faith and Culture 2023 cont.

See these reports about the symposium as well:

- Baptist Standard “Voices” article, by Nathan Hays and Darin Davis:
  https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/voices/developing-a-sense-of-calling-matters-for-the-church/
- Baylor’s Media and Public Relations office press release:
- Videos from several of the sessions are available here:
Our fourth congregational retreat was on February 21-24, 2024, at Laity Lodge, an ecumenical retreat center established by the H. E. Butt Family Foundation. A total of 43 people from 10 congregations were able to come. Participants had rich conversations over meals and during the ample rest time, and they took part in workshops led by Drs. Darin Davis and Steve Moore, CEO Emeritus of the M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust. The retreat also included a session where congregational participants met to look at challenges and opportunities and how these might influence their Soundings-related work going forward. Wendell Kimbrough led morning and evening worship in addition to a Friday night concert.

After the retreat, participants expressed how helpful it was to them:

“I can better see myself as a vital member of my congregation. Before this retreat, I’d been in a bit of a season where I wasn’t sure about my role or value at the church, but being a part of representing my congregation showed me that my role is important.”

“The distinction of our call individually & congregationally will be enriched because of the sharing and encouragement that took place at this retreat. We are better when we are encouraged by others and pray for fellow workmen in the Gospel.”
SOUNDINGS PROJECT TEAM

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UPDATES

- The Soundings Project was originally scheduled to end in the spring of 2023, but Lilly Endowment Inc. granted an extension in light of the delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. We are now in this two-year extension period, which will end on March 31, 2025.
- In 2023, the Soundings Project moved from being housed in the Institute for Faith and Learning to the Honors College at Baylor.
- We continue to collect and summarize resources for congregations at https://iflsoundings.web.baylor.edu/resources, as well as provide books supporting their work. For instance, we provided Soundings and CLMPI participants at the symposium copies of Mack McCarter’s book How to Remake the World Neighborhood to Neighborhood.
In 2023 and 2024, we have seen congregations develop their projects further, deepening their understanding and pursuit of vocation. Some updates are below, but a full list of congregational projects is available at https://iflsoundings.web.baylor.edu/congregations.

First Baptist Church of Waco’s project culminated with the publication of Soul Culture: Stewarding the Five Ingredients of our Common Life (Smyth & Helwys Publishing), by pastors Matt Snowden and Joshua Hays. The book draws on a series of sermons, listening sessions, and workshops at the congregation supported by the Soundings Project. The book takes a close look at church culture through the “ingredients” of beliefs, attitudes, values, goals, and practices. We are grateful for the work of First Baptist Church of Waco and that many people even beyond the Soundings Project can benefit from the congregational project by reading the book. See the write up in the Baptist Standard.
Sacred Heart Catholic Church continues its focus on youth formation through a range of different programs. The congregation seeks to provide instruction and space for discussion among youth through different curricular resources (such as small group booklets and devotions), but an important emphasis through these programs is that vocation involves service. As a result, the team works to involve youth more actively in service, such as having high school students facilitate the Vacation Bible School (VBS) in the summer of 2023. They communicate other service opportunities through Flocknote, an app that allows for messaging throughout the week and that is more accessible to youth than other communication tools, such as email.

The youth participating in Sacred Heart’s programs have deepened their sense of vocation, as one can see from some of their comments in Flocknote:
• “Vocation is like a calling. I hear God calling me to work harder for beliefs.”
• “Vocation is a call that God gives to you your purpose in life. I hear God calling me to help out in Church.”

In addition to this engagement with youth, the congregation partnered with Diocese of Austin Life, Charity, and Justice Ministries to sponsor Saint Luke Production’s “Tolton: From Slave to Priest” in Waco. “Tolton” tells of Father Augustus Tolton, the first African American Catholic priest—an extraordinary story of pursuing a vocation fervently even in the midst of extraordinary resistance.
Pioneer Drive Baptist Church in Abilene continues exploring communal vocation through collecting interviews and composing a church history. Dr. Rich Traylor, professor of history at Hardin-Simmons University, has finished writing the history and presented his work at the annual West Texas Historical Association meeting in April 2023. Dr. John N. Davis, a lay leader and professor of management at Hardin-Simmons, has been designing instructional materials for vocation-related Bible studies at the church. Davis also coordinated and chaired a presentation by three Soundings congregational representatives at the symposium, and he encouraged the Baptist congregations in the grant to write about their projects in the Baptist Standard.

Alliance Bible Church in Waco has been an example of a congregation that has retained the core of its project while also pivoting based on new opportunities. The church project originally involved leading classes that encouraged the congregants to reach out to one another—thus embracing their missional callings. The congregational leaders noted that they are already seeing cultural changes through these and related activities. As part of the missional mindset, the congregation became aware of the need to reach out to the deaf community. Such a ministry was not in its original project plan. Nevertheless, they formed a partnership with Rev. Richard Lawson, a licensed and ordained minister, to begin a church plant in the Waco area. Alliance thus represents how nurturing a core aspect of its calling, in this case being missional, invites it to pivot its project plan as it encounters new opportunities.
CONGREGATIONAL PROJECTS

First Baptist Church of Rosebud has been organizing revivals and other community events that have breathed new life and hope into the church. Book discussions of Thom Rainer’s book *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* have helped the members think afresh about how God is calling the congregation forward. For a Baptist Standard article about the congregational project there, see [https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/voices/revitalization-put-fizz-back-in-our-church/](https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/voices/revitalization-put-fizz-back-in-our-church/)

Bridges, the project at First Baptist Church of Amarillo, continues to spur conversations about faith and work. This Baptist Standard article describes that congregation’s work in greater depth: [https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/voices/bridges-between-worship-and-work/](https://www.baptiststandard.com/opinion/voices/bridges-between-worship-and-work/) First Presbyterian Church in Amarillo is also launching a series of workshops on faith and work.
These are some of the next steps for the Soundings Project:

- Meet in person with congregations throughout the summer and early fall, including hosting several more gatherings
- Support new congregational initiatives with funds remaining from those churches that left the grant
- Work with a videography team to create videos about the Soundings Project in general and partner congregations
- Plan for ways of sharing about the Soundings Project more broadly, including how to carry its vision forward even after the end of the grant

We are thrilled that 2023 to 2024 has been such a fruitful time for the Soundings Project, and we look forward to continuing to support and encourage our partners as we look to spread the seeds of Soundings even after the grant period ends.
CHURCH PARTNERS

Alliance Bible Church

Bethlehem Baptist Church

First Baptist Church of Amarillo

First Baptist Church of Rosebud
CHURCH PARTNERS

First Baptist Church of Waco

First Presbyterian Amarillo

Holy Spirit Episcopal

Park Lake Baptist Church
CHURCH PARTNERS

Pioneer Drive Baptist Church

Primera Iglesia Bautista de Waco

Robinson Church of Christ

Sacred Heart Catholic Church