



*"A Place Where Worship to the LORD Abides"*

# FINAL FOCUS GROUP REPORT FOR THE THE HOUSE OF JUDAH

April, 2015

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## INTRODUCTION

In January of 2015, The House of Judah (THOJ) began with the gathering and analysis of qualitative data for the purpose of developing a seven-year strategic plan. This project represents THOJ's commitment to fulfilling its obligations to assist community, charged with improving the quality of life for the residents of Suffolk County. Early in the process, THOJ established teams tasked with conducting focus groups, analyzing the data, and utilizing the information in the development of a strategic plan. The timeline required that focus group sessions be conducted during February and March and that a final focus group report be provided prior to the end of April. This document represents the final report, which has been delivered on schedule. It is now the responsibility of the leadership teams to prepare a draft version of the strategic plan prior to the end of May.

In total, 9 focus groups were convened and included more than 70 individuals from the congregation. Individuals were introduced to the project during an annual meeting and were asked to volunteer to participate. Staff from the College worked from the list to develop purposefully selected groups identified by distinct characteristics. These included new and original church members, young adults and seasoned parishioners, and groups separated by gender. In all, 300 unique statements were identified during data analysis. These open codes represented the first phase of data analysis. The second phase, which reorganized the statements based on commonalities established in the research protocol, resulted in 35 themes (axial codes). The final phase of coding reorganized the 35 themes into 4 final themes known as selective codes. In short, these final four themes represent the most salient information gleaned from the study. While the complete listing of themes is provided in Appendix A, a summary of the highlights are presented in the next section under each of the four major themes. The four overarching themes that emerged from the analysis include:

- *The Church is committed to enabling holistic person and family development through practical, biblically sound teachings.*
- *Church leadership should review operational procedures to ensure more congregational participation and more effective leveraging of resources.*
- *The Church is positioned to make growth a central strategic tactic, but must focus on targeted and sustainable growth to ensure success.*
- *The Church needs to enhance its outreach efforts to expand its positive impact to the surrounding communities.*

## FOCUS GROUP THEMES

The order in which the selective (final 4) and axial (35 intermediate) themes is presented is intentional. The first selective theme represents information about the mission, purpose, goals, and values of the organization and, accordingly, is the most appropriate starting point. The axial codes are then presented in a manner that allows the themes to tell a story through presentation of the mission, a description of the environment, descriptions of what the congregation receives, why the church values its people, and the changes occurring as a result<sup>1</sup>.

### **The Church is committed to enabling holistic person and family development through practical, biblically sound teachings**

#### *Teaching the Bible is the core mission of the church.*

This sub-theme emerged as a result of individuals reiterating that the method and manner in which teachings are provided are unique to THOJ. In general, there was agreement that above all things, the most important service provided by the church is the sermons which are provided in a very practical manner. Specific themes included:

- The Bible is the blueprint for holistic living.
- The Bible is the most important human resource.
- THOJ exists to “teach the family how to function spiritually in today’s society.”<sup>2</sup>
- The church is about “spiritual reeducation.”
- The preaching is for practical purposes.

#### *THOJ provides a unique church environment.*

This sub-theme emerged as a result of individuals noting, on numerous occasions, that THOJ does not look, sound, or feel like any other church they have attended. While one of the participants stated that “Judah is so different that it may scare away some people,” participants were overjoyed with the church experience. Specific themes included:

- The church is about being “unchurched.”
- THOJ “debunks myths about church.”
- The church defies regular church expectations.
- THOJ breaks “the stigma of church.”
- The church takes “an innovative approach to teaching.”

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<sup>1</sup> Not all of the axial codes nor the open codes are presented in the narrative. Please find the complete list in the appendix.

<sup>2</sup> Information presented within quotation marks represents verbatim statements. To ensure the quality of the data, direct quotes are presented as often as possible.

*The church is focused on helping people realize their potential.*

Many participants stated that one of the greatest benefits they have received is the ability to reach their potential. They indicated that rather than by happenstance, this is a fundamental element of the teachings at THOJ. Specific themes included:

- The church helps people work through life challenges.
- The church “helps you see the potential in your life.”
- You must not accept mediocre.
- The church teaches you to “walk your purpose.”

*The church is welcoming.*

Every one of the focus group sessions included copious comments about the friendly, loving, and welcoming nature that is a core cultural value at the church. Participants explained that this is, based on their perceptions, the greatest strength provided by the church and one that is specific to THOJ. Specific themes included:

- “Everybody is accepted.”
- Once you come in, you “join the family.”
- THOJ allows you to “take the mask off.”
- People are down to earth.

**Church leadership should review operational procedures to ensure more congregational participation and more effective leveraging of resources.**

The second selective theme represents information about areas in which the church can improve organizational efficiencies, better leverage resources, and encourage greater participation for a broader group of members. The axial codes are presented in a logical sequence that starts with participant opinions about funding and financial transparency, moves through an examination of potential operational changes, and ends with more formally engaging the congregation across ministries.

*The Church could provide more transparency with the finances.*

A statement made by numerous participants was that individuals are often most likely to give more of their time and money when they can see the benefits of their efforts. While participants appreciated the yearly report, there was interest in receiving more regular and thorough progress reports. Specific themes included:

- People are more likely to give to ministries they are passionate about.
- Participants would like to see a “full detailed disclosure of expenditures.”
- Individuals request “more transparency with the Church budget.”

- There were requests for “more frequent financial reporting.”

*Operational changes will enhance the Church’s effectiveness.*

Rather than speaking to weaknesses, participants were prepared and able to speak to operational inefficiencies and areas where minor adjustments could help the church better leverage its resources. Specific themes included:

- To assist the congregation in gaining information about services, the church should develop “an automated call system.”
- Communication is an area for improvement.
- The church needs “formal communication of scheduling.”
- The church should establish its own transportation system.
- Establish a “directory of skills and abilities so member can depend on each other.”

*The Church needs to reach out to members more formally.*

While focus group participants noted that they were asked about interests when joining the church and are asked, on occasion, informally, they noted that the leadership should employ more formal, consistent tactics to increase needed participation. Additionally, they indicated that formal outreach would likely increase involvement. Specific themes included:

- “Follow up calls for those not at the service.”
- Leaders should meet with non-engaged members.
- The church “must find ways to engage more new members.”
- There should be more “boots on the ground” to encourage volunteership.

*The Church needs to provide more opportunities for relationship building.*

Given that many members are not located near the church, participants noted that more opportunities for relationship building between congregation members would benefit the church. Specific themes included:

- Conduct outings for the youth.
- “The church needs Friday night activities for teens.”
- “There needs to be more opportunities to interact outside of service.”
- The church should provide retreats for members.
- “Need more church events to create stronger bonds.”

**The Church is positioned to make growth a central strategic tactic, but must focus on targeted and sustainable growth to ensure success.**

The third selective theme includes information about areas in which the church can grow substantially in coming years. Guided by the consensus view that the church is intended to

grow in numbers and scope, the participants spoke of the potential for expansion in the near future. The axial codes within this category included the expansion of the church in regards to size, the types of ministries and activities that are currently and could be prioritized in the future, and potential concerns regarding unfettered growth.

*The future of the church includes expansion.*

Aware of the impending relocation of the church, participants spoke about what impact they expected from the new location with its larger space. Some of the changes were minor, while others included the terms “Judah City” and “Judah County” to express the monumental impact they believe the church will have within Suffolk County and beyond.

Specific themes included:

- “It will be a mega church in the future.”
- The church can “become a self-sustaining economy in the future.”
- “The church will expand to Africa and Asia.”
- THOJ will be a hub for churches.
- “THOJ will be the establishment that breaks establishments.”

*The Church should consider adding ministries/activities.*

Along with the expectations for significant changes as a result of relocation, participants voiced a desire to expand the ministries and activities given the larger space and new opportunities to meet community needs. Specific themes included:

- The church should develop a “check on me” ministry.
- “A food pantry and a soup kitchen would allow for service to community members in need.”
- “Add a youth choir.”
- Develop a “prison prevention ministry.”
- “Provide more support to the poor.”

*There are concerns about future growth.*

While there was palpable excitement regarding the potential growth, there was also some trepidation that with significant change to the church, the unique experience of THOJ may be lost. In order for change to be sustainable and welcomed by the membership, leadership will need to weigh decisions about growth against mission creep. Specific themes included:

- “Growing the church can’t take away from the closeness.”
- “Need a stronger infrastructure to support growth.”
- The church needs “greater diversity of membership and leadership.”
- The leadership “must stay accessible.”
- “Provide more support to the poor.”

**The Church needs to enhance its outreach efforts to expand its positive impact to the surrounding communities.**

The final selective theme revolves around the church's outreach efforts and impact on its surrounding communities. A common refrain shared by participants in all of the groups is that THOJ is not about taking what is taught and keeping it with the membership, but rather sharing the teachings with the community through word and deed. The axial themes specific to this selective theme include information regarding the effectiveness of outreach efforts, providing a vision to the community, and developing opportunities to expand the reach of the church through new outreach activities. As was the case with the third selective theme, leadership will need to weigh expansion against the mission.

*The Church has reached out to the community.*

While not within the immediate proximity of THOJ, the church has participated in numerous community events designed to help those in need. Specific themes included:

- “We give out sneakers to the homeless.”
- The church participated in the “night against violence.”
- “We were involved in the Bayport Alliance.”
- The church focuses on taking the lessons into the community.
- The church is heavily involved with serving food during events.

*THOJ has a measurable impact on the community.*

The church has not been as involved in community events in its local community, however, the immediate area has benefited from the efforts of the church and its members. Specific themes included:

- The church acts “as an information conduit to the community.”
- The church is a “known resource.”
- The church is connected with the Chamber of Commerce.
- “The community appreciates the church's service.”
- The community “believes that THOJ is a blessing.”

*The Church needs to reach out, more intentionally, to the community.*

The church has undoubtedly, according to participants, impacted the local and expanded communities; however, there are indications that the impact can be enhanced through more intentionality. Focus group members indicated in multiple sessions, that the community is still largely unaware about what the church stands for and what benefits will emerge as a result of more interactions with THOJ. Specific themes included:

- The church should run more community events.
- The church should host more community events.
- The community is unaware of the “jewel that is Judah.”
- The church needs to “engage in greater community empowerment.”
- “The local community does not have a favorable impression of the church.”
- “There is unfamiliarity with much of the community.”

Increase the Church’s outreach offerings.

With the caveat that leadership must examine opportunities for growth against the mission of the church, operational priorities, and available resources (especially human resources), participants were clear in their desire to increase offerings to the community. They noted that expanding outreach would increase good will and allow for the message of the church to permeate new populations. Specific themes included:

- “We should offer CPR classes.”
- “Need parenting workshops.”
- “People could receive certifications from recognized training programs.”
- The church should offer “more music and art programs.”
- “Providing conferences will draw in more people.”

## CONCLUSION

The information presented in this report represents input from approximately 20% of the membership of The House of Judah and, given the cross-section of participants, provides a robust and representative sample of opinions. It should be noted that qualitative reports are very useful for understanding context and gathering both broad and deep insight into an organization. It should not be concluded, however, that the information included should be used to generate any statistical generalizations. Rather, this document is best used in generating conversations, providing direction for further data gathering, and supplementing decision making processes. Of particular importance is the information on the mission of THOJ. The codes presented in that section of the report can be extrapolated for the purpose of developing draft mission and vision statements and organizational goals. The other categories, including growth and expansion, operational review, and community outreach, will provide the team with potential strategic objectives that can be prioritized and scheduled over a five to seven year process. In summary, the information within this report is useful and will help guide the church, however, quantitative data will prove useful in providing a comprehensive understanding of all the factors that could be considered when engaging in strategic planning.

## APPENDIX A: FINAL CODING FOR THOJ FOCUS GROUPS

### SELECTIVE CODE 1: THE CHURCH IS COMMITTED TO ENABLING HOLISTIC PERSON AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH PRACTICAL, BIBLICALLY SOUND TEACHINGS

#### **Teaching the Bible is the core mission of the church**

The Bible is the Blueprint for healthy families and individuals  
The Bible is the blueprint for holistic living  
The Bible is the most important human resource  
The children's ministry is about teaching the word to the youth  
"Teach the family how to function spiritually in today's society"  
The "real word" is preached at THOJ  
Provides a better understanding of worship  
Practical spiritual lessons  
Church exists to help people develop a relationship with God  
Understanding God's word is transformative  
The church is both spiritual and practical  
"This is about spiritual retraining"  
The preaching is for practical purposes  
The Pastor wants everyone to walk in their defined purpose  
"It's a spiritual reeducation"

#### **THOJ provides a unique church environment**

The church is about being "unchurched"  
"Debunking myths about church"  
"Judah is so different that it may scare away some people"  
"Progressive and unique"  
The church is innovative  
The church is helping to debunk stereotypes about African Americans  
The church defies regular church expectations  
THOJ breaks "the stigma of church"  
Traditional churches don't discuss the role of family  
The church is always innovating  
The church takes "an innovative approach to teaching"

#### **The Church is about restoration**

"A fresh start"  
"A safe haven... a refuge"  
"Helping each other"  
"Improving people's lives"  
The church helps "make people whole"  
"Its here to elevate people"  
"Whole person empowerment"  
The church seeks to help you "upgrade yourself"  
The church is about "whole person health"  
The church is about restoring individual balance  
The church helps heal people  
"Building the whole person"

“Beacon of light”  
“Breaks down boundaries and barriers”  
The church is focused on empowerment

### **The Church is focused on family health**

The church does not want people to be in broken relationships  
“The restoration of family”  
“Bringing families together”  
THOJ makes the family the priority  
“Building up the family economically”  
“Building up the family spiritually”  
“Changing lives one family at a time”  
Healthy individuals make healthy families  
“Its here to nourish families”

### **The Church is focused on helping people realize their potential**

The church helps people work through life challenges  
The church “helps you see the potential in your life”  
Understanding the individual role and purpose  
The church believes in increasing hope  
The church teaches you not to accept mediocre  
The church helps people become familiar with their purpose  
The church teaches you to “walk your purpose”  
“THOJ makes our lives better”  
“Inspiration to be better”  
“Motivation to do better”

### **Church focuses on financial well-being**

Financial health is a focus  
The church is “about economic empowerment”  
“Promote prosperity and happiness”  
“Economic freedom” is a goal for all members

### **The Church has a “heart”**

Kindness is a core value  
The church exists to positively change the lives of the membership  
THOJ exemplifies love in action  
The church has a “heart of service”

### **The Church is welcoming**

“Everybody is accepted”  
“Judah accepts everyone”  
“No preferential treatment”  
Once you come in you “join the family”  
Church offers a lifeline of support to people in need  
The church is very accepting  
THOJ allows you to “take the mask off”  
“You are accepted at THOJ”  
You are recognized for being a person at THOJ  
People don't think jobs are beneath them  
“The pastor is touchable”

People are down to earth  
The church seeks to meet people at their place of need  
Service to others is a core value

### **The Church is authentic**

Confidentiality is a priority  
Consistency is a hallmark  
The church is a study in unity  
“It's a family here”  
“Willingness to help serve”

### **Diversity is becoming a hallmark of the Church**

The church has gender diversity  
The church is increasing its multiculturalness  
THOJ is becoming “a melting pot”  
The church should sponsor ethnically and culturally diverse festivals  
“The church is not a Black church”  
Need a diversity of languages and not just races

**SELECTIVE CODE 2: CHURCH LEADERSHIP SHOULD REVIEW OPERATIONAL PROCEDURES TO ENSURE MORE CONGREGATIONAL PARTICIPATION AND MORE EFFECTIVE LEVERAGING OF RESOURCES**

**The Church needs to increase its revenues**

“Funding may be a problem”  
“We need more fundraising”  
Members would like more progress reports on fundraising efforts  
The church needs additional funding  
The church needs corporate funding  
The church needs more finances to grow and expand the impact

**The Church could provide more transparency with the finances**

People are more likely to give to ministries they are passionate about  
People are more likely to give when they see where the money is going  
“Full detailed disclosure of expenditures”  
“More transparency with the Church budget”  
“More frequent financial reporting”

**Operational changes will enhance the Church’s effectiveness**

“An automated call system”  
Communication is an area for improvement  
“Need formal communication of scheduling”  
Need to leverage the capabilities in the church  
The church should establish its own transportation system  
Establish a “directory of skills and abilities so that members can depend on each other”

**The Church could make better use of technology**

“Christian Instagram”  
Create a text or e-mail alert system  
“Enhance the Facebook page”  
“Expand the use of social media”  
Expanding into twitter and Instagram will increase exposure  
“Need a mass communication system”  
The church should use a twitter account  
The church should make better use of technology  
Instagram can be used for advertising the church  
Set up a “mass text alert”  
Need to take better advantage of social media  
The church would benefit from an online calendar  
More information should be available online

**There is strong leadership at the Church**

The leadership models selfless behavior  
The greatest resource is the people  
The pastor does not seek to maintain control  
The pastor encourages people to take charge  
The pastor is collaborative  
The church teaches members to share their gifts

Develop opportunities for youth leaders  
Some leaders are serving multiple roles  
There is criteria for volunteering  
The church has strong committed leadership  
There are opportunities for those individuals who want to take on leadership roles

### **The Church needs more participation from its membership**

A larger percentage of the congregation needs to help lead church efforts  
Church members can meet the needs of other members  
Inconsistent tithing is a problem  
Members volunteer for community events  
More involvement is needed from newer members  
Some ministries fall off because of nobody to lead  
Some ministries have started and fizzled out

### **The Church needs to reach out to members more formally**

Find a way to incorporate people's skills and talents into new ministries  
"Follow up calls for those not at the service"  
Identify the skills of the congregation and find ways to utilize for ministry  
Leaders should meet with non-engaged members  
More responsibilities need to be delegated  
"Must find ways to engage more new members"  
More formal interdepartmental communication  
Membership of committees should be rotated  
People are encouraged to join through informal means  
There should be more leadership "boots on the ground" to encourage volunteerism  
The church should be more interactive in seeking volunteers  
The church needs a larger leadership team  
Rotation of leaders across ministries would create greater understanding

### **The Church needs to provide more opportunities for relationship building**

Conduct outings for the youth  
"The church needs Friday night activities for teens"  
The church should encourage youth relationship building  
"There needs to be more opportunities to interact outside of service"  
The church should provide retreats for members  
"Need more church events to create stronger bonds"  
Need opportunities for recreational trips for the youth

**SELECTIVE CODE 3: THE CHURCH IS POSITIONED TO MAKE GROWTH A CENTRAL STRATEGIC TACTIC, BUT MUST FOCUS ON TARGETED AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH TO ENSURE SUCCESS**

**The future of the Church includes expansion**

Church will be consulting with other churches to help them grow  
Continued growth will lead to “Judah City”  
In the future THOJ will be the community church of Suffolk County  
“I think it will be a mega-church”  
“It will be a mega church in the future”  
Future development should include opportunities for church affiliated housing  
The church can become “a self-sustaining economy”  
The church can become a “venue for concerts with known artists”  
The church will be international in the future  
The church will be “known as a leadership incubator”  
The church will be “conducting economic summits” in the future  
The church will be “running a school in the future”  
The church will “expand to Asia and Africa in the future”  
The church will have a “village associated with it”  
The future church will be a “campus with multiple buildings”  
The future of the Church will be a “church affiliated village”  
THOJ in the future will be global  
THOJ must make the surrounding community healthier  
THOJ will be the hub for churches  
THOJ will have a global presence  
THOJ will have a radio station in the future  
THOJ will have a television based ministry  
THOJ will have a “TV show in the future”  
Judah could produce clothing with the church name on it  
Lack of space is the only barrier to successful growth  
“THOJ will start charitable giving around the world”  
“The message of THOJ must spread nationally”  
The impact of THOJ will “fundamentally alter the county economy”  
There will be multiple church sites in the future  
The church, in the future, can impact the economy  
“THOJ will be the establishment that breaks establishments”  
“We can have stores in the church”  
The church could develop a “planned community with affordable housing”  
The church could develop a recording studio

**The Church should consider expanding its ministries/activities**

The church needs a bigger youth department  
Church groups are being asked to develop new programming  
“We should expand our youth program”  
“Expand the music ministry”  
There is formal support for some, but not all groups  
“More charity work”  
“More emphasis on the arts”  
“Some ministries are underdeveloped”

### **The Church should consider adding ministries/activities**

The Church should develop a “check on me” ministry

“A food pantry and a soup kitchen would allow for service to community members in need”

“Add a youth choir”

“Bring the love of the church to the shut ins”

“The church could help people more”

Create a formal entrepreneurship ministry

Develop a “prison prevention ministry”

“We don't have a senior ministry”

“Need a ministry that feeds the hungry”

“Need an acts of kindness ministry”

“Should have a single mom's ministry”

“Provide more support to the poor”

The church should start a homeless ministry

The church needs to develop a singles ministry

The church needs to develop ministries that feed the hungry

### **More activities need to be added for the youth**

Afterschool programs should be provided

Comprehensive youth facilities

Comprehensive youth programs

The church should have a children's choir

There is a focus on developing Saturday programming for the youth

The church should work on lowering the youth suicide rate

We need “a nursery for little babies”

### **Develop educational opportunities**

The church could have a k-12 church school

The church could start a bible college

The church should engage in teacher training

Members would like a Christian Academy (K-12 education)

### **The Church should expand its economic empowerment function**

Church facilities can be used for financial planning

Church facilities can be used for insurance education

“Need to have church affiliated businesses”

Financial workshops will draw in new members

The church could provide tax advisors

The church should establish scholarships to help students pay for college

### **The Church should develop opportunities for greater job mobility**

The church could develop a skills center

The church could offer a comprehensive job training center

### **The Church could positively impact health**

“Run a basketball tournament”

“Start summer events and camps”

“Start a gym”

The church could directly impact healthy outcomes

THOJ could establish a facility like a YMCA

The church should expand to health and wellness

The church should have mental health services

The church should develop athletic teams and leagues

“Run more health fairs”

Should provide counseling services for the youth

The church should provide family counseling

The church should run a community health center

### **A new location will assist in increasing visibility**

A more prominent location will increase awareness

A more visible location will assist with outreach

### **The Church should initiate advertising to increase membership**

The church could advertise in local papers

The church should produce business cards to advertise

The Pastor could have a television commercial

### **There are concerns about future growth**

“Growing the church can't take away from the closeness”

“Need a stronger infrastructure to support growth”

Need “greater diversity of membership and leadership”

The “leadership must stay accessible”

## **SELECTIVE CODE 4: THE CHURCH NEEDS TO ENHANCE ITS OUTREACH EFFORTS TO EXPAND ITS POSITIVE IMPACT TO THE SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES**

### **The Church has reached out to the community**

“We give out sneakers to the homeless”  
The church participated in the “night against violence”  
“We were involved in the Bayport Alliance”  
The church focuses on taking the lessons into the community  
The church is heavily involved with serving food during events

### **THOJ has a measurable impact on the community**

“Act as an information conduit to the community”  
“It affects the community”  
“The church is a known resource”  
The church is connected with the Chamber of Commerce  
The Chamber of Commerce depends on the church  
“The community appreciates the church's service”  
The community “believes that THOJ is a blessing”

### **The Church needs to reach out, more intentionally, to the community**

The church should run more community events  
The church should host more community events  
“Work with the communities to discover needs”  
THOJ has a closer relationship with members of the community in need of the services provided  
The community is unaware of the "jewel that is Judah”  
“The community needs to understand what the church's brand is”  
The church needs to “engage in greater community empowerment”  
The church needs to more “intentionally seek opportunities to interact with the community”  
“The local community does not have a favorable impression of the church”  
The church must consider all socioeconomic groups when deciding on services to offer  
“There is unfamiliarity with much of the community”  
“Need to communicate the strengths of the church to the community”

### **The Church needs to be intentional in providing a vision to the community**

The church needs to be a strong voice against injustice  
There needs to be more of an evangelizing function  
The church needs to become the voice of the community

### **Increase the Church's outreach offerings**

“We should offer CPR classes”  
“Need parenting workshops”  
“People could receive certifications from recognized training programs”  
The church should offer “more music and art programs”  
“Providing conferences will draw in more people”  
“Provide information on social issues”  
The church should “provide retreats for external audiences”  
“THOJ should run spiritual conferences and workshops