

New Beginnings Leadership Team
Report to the Session
June 17, 2014

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We believe that First Presbyterian Church members are committed to God's mission in the world and aware that our changing context requires us to adapt in order to remain a vital and faithful community of disciples. We also recognize the limitations imposed on us by our shrinking and aging community and our lack of knowledge about the needs of our community.

While congregational conflict and lack of pastoral stability over the last 10 years has left us smaller in numbers, we believe that our congregation has also experienced an increased level of commitment to the Church's vitality. The congregation expressed support for and appears open to adaptive changes but, without a clear vision to guide those changes, is not ready to make any bold decisions for change.

Therefore, we recommend that, to gain clarity about our future direction, we engage in further study and exploration of our community, reflecting and evaluating our current community engagement in conversation with *The Externally Focused Church*, a practical, how-to book written with two types of churches in mind: (1) churches who are already externally focused in what they do, but want to learn what others are doing so they can broaden and deepen their impact in the community; and (2) churches that have heard about the growing external focus and want more information on how to become an externally focused church.

We believe this step will help us gain clarity about a vision that will guide our ministries, within the framework of inspiration and wisdom from God through the Holy Spirit.

BACKGROUND

Last September, the Session approved our congregation's participation in *New Beginnings*, a three-step process designed to help congregations consider a new vision for their ministry. In October, the session appointed a leadership team consisting of Julie Courtney, Jeff Getty, Pam Jan, Michael Levitas, and Lisa McIndoe to help lead this process.

Originally designed for congregations who face urgent and often drastic decisions about change, the use of *New Beginnings* has been extended to congregations like ours as well, to help us engage in self-examination and reflection about how to adapt to the changing context in which we do ministry.

We completed the first step of the process in November, a congregational assessment conducted by John Sterner, a New Beginnings consultant with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The assessment describes our community, the make-up and commitment of our congregation, our financial viability and total assets, our mission life, and our buildings and grounds.

In January, our New Beginnings Team completed the second step, attending a two-day training to help us guide the congregation through the third step, small group meetings designed to engage at least 50 % of the congregation in conversation about the assessment and to make a decision about the future direction of our ministries.

From March to May of this year, more than 70 members of our congregation participated in five small groups, meeting six times, some in people's homes and some at the church. We believe the conversations

have helped us see ourselves and our context for ministry more clearly, raising helpful questions and posing exciting possibilities for our future. The conversations have been lively, leading us through a range of emotions as we have contemplated our future.

Two weeks ago, we concluded the third step in the process and, since then, the Leadership Team has met twice to pull together common points of agreement and recommendations from the small groups to report to the session. Our report is not a strategic plan, but one more step in that direction.

SIX SESSIONS OF HOLY CONVERSATION: PROCESS AND CONSENSUS (consensus = highlighted sections below)

Session 1 – Vitality and Discipleship

Vitality - Our discernment process began with a simple reflection about what makes a congregation vital. Vital congregations know who they are, where they are going and why. They know how to assess their strengths and play to them. They know how they intend to proclaim the Gospel in their location and they organize all activities – worship, evangelism, fellowship, education and outreach – in alignment with that singular purpose. The identifying characteristics of vital congregations include (1) a sense of mission driven by the Gospel; (2) the church’s relevance to the community; (3) the church’s pursuit of their mission with passion and energy; and (4) the church’s ability to mobilize its resources for a common mission.

Initially, members of the congregation identified those things that our Church is “good at”. **Our groups generally characterized ourselves as friendly, caring, embracing, musically-enriched and willing to reach out to those in need.**

Membership v. Discipleship Model - We then looked at the day to day function of our ministries as they relate to the membership or discipleship model church, understanding that the discipleship model would “serve us better in engaging our focus on the Great Commission”. In that Commission, Jesus gives the directive to go into all the nations to teach people how to follow in his ways, to tell of God’s love and redemptive work in the world and show people how to be his disciples. This directive challenges the disciples to go and meet the needs of the people in strange and foreign communities, not unlike those who are increasingly present in our neighborhood today.

The discipleship model asks us to know the identity, nuanced needs and culture of the neighborhood or community surrounding our church and to mobilize resources to bring the Gospel alive in ways that fit with our community. It asks us to risk the safety and ease of what we’ve known in order to leave a legacy of offering freedom and healing and relief for people in need. This model acknowledges the fear in taking risk and promises that Jesus will accompany us on our Great Commission.

Some in the congregation perceive that our church exhibits more characteristics of a membership model although they detect recent change moving more towards the discipleship model. Other members of our church, particularly those personally involved in our mission work, perceive that our church exhibits more characteristics of a discipleship church. However, most people also recognize that the majority of our mission work is not focused on hands-on activities as much as our generous financial contributions.

Contextual Relevance - Vital congregations live out their ministry in a way that is compatible with the demographics and unique opportunities of the areas in which the church is located. As the demographics and characteristics of the neighborhoods and communities change, vital congregations also change in order to continue their mission.

Most of our small groups agreed that the data presented in our assessment was sobering. Corporately, we realize that we have been out of touch with our immediate neighborhood and community and we are not sure what their needs are. While certain demographic features of our community (age and race) reflect the demographics of our congregation, other demographic features (income/education) do not.

Our church's neighborhood includes Cumberland and the surrounding region, which has changed significantly in the last thirty years. From an economy fueled by industrial production, the population has declined as the industrial activity closed leaving an older, poorer, shrinking population. Growth from new economic activity has come with the construction of prisons which have added to the stress of the social safety net by increasing the number of people who are poor, under/unemployed and dependent on government and charitable assistance in order to survive.

Over the last ten years our church has reported a significant decline in membership and worship attendance, yet worship attendance reflects about 50% of our membership compared with about 30% ten years ago. While our numbers have decreased, our contributions have remained consistent. Seventy percent (70%) of the congregation is part of the Boomer generation or older as opposed to a suggested target of 50/50 split of younger/older members in vibrant churches. The economic demographics of our congregation show a wealthier cohort than the community at large.

Passion and Energy - Vibrant and dynamic congregations move with passion and energy into the mission they claim. Passionate congregations have passionate members whose faith makes a difference in their daily lives. These churches are looking to make new disciples of Jesus Christ and not just welcome existing disciples.

This factor raised the anxiety of most of the participants in the small group meetings. Some members are tired; some members are content. Other members are excited about "what could be". The small groups ranked our level of energy and passion between 5 and 8 on a scale of 1 to 10.

Resources - Vital congregations have the resources and the ability to mobilize their resources for a common mission.

All participants agreed that while some of our financial resources are restricted, our church does have plentiful resources. Our strength is our relative abundant financial capacity, which flows from an endowment of \$2.1 million dollars. We are limited from a human resource perspective by the number of people in the congregation willing or able to personally participate in mission activities.

Session 2 – New Beginnings Assessment Report

In Session 2, we reviewed the New Beginnings Assessment Report with the goal of gaining a realistic picture of the strength of our present ministry. We answered questions about the kind of ministry and programs our church is really good at, the depth of the energy or passion we have for the ministry and the financial and leadership resources available for the ministry. The groups focused on those areas they are passionate about or those activities which excite them. **There was general consensus that worship, music, singing, mission trips and the Summer Lunch Box Program are all areas of passion and excitement.**

In evaluating the ministries or programs that the church is really "good at", these included music, choir, hand bells, the Learning Tree Nursery School, caring for one another, opening our building to others and our local, national and international mission partnerships.

Session 3 – Examining our Community

In Session 3, we reviewed the demographics of our community reported in the Assessment, which defines our neighborhood as the community living within a 10 mile radius of the Church. The largest demographic groups in our community were identified as older people with limited financial resources who are living in households without children.

There was some surprising information regarding a demographic concentration in the West Virginia showing a small group of younger, middle class residents of which our groups had not previously been aware. There also appeared to be a group of households for which demographic information from Experian was not available because of their lack of credit card history, potentially making them the group with the greatest financial and spiritual needs in our community.

Session 4 – Our Church and God’s Mission

Session 4 focused on the ministries and mission our congregation is “best at” in order to effectively serve and reach our community. In order to live out God’s mission, to establish relationships with people in crisis or hopelessness, congregations must know the needs, ways, language and lifestyle of the “field of mission” which surrounds it.

Attractional models for congregational life operate on the premise that a building with good Christian programming and strong worship will “attract” people to it. The New Beginnings process suggests that congregations who attempt to tweak worship services or patch up old buildings find that these kinds of changes don’t really help their efforts to redevelop the ministry. In contrast, New Beginnings suggests that a missional model of church is not a “come to” place but a “go to” lifestyle. In this model, people are constantly following God’s mission to the world, specifically into the neighborhood in which it lives.

In this regard, there was a significant element of our congregation which does not believe that we need to make “bold” changes in direction. They perceive our church as being mission-oriented and are proud of the church’s role in a number of local, national and international mission efforts. This element of the congregation stands ready to accept and embrace change but is looking for incremental change, not sweeping change. Other members embrace new mission-related activity, including social activism to further God’s plan for us and our community.

Section 5 – Discovering Our Options

Section 5 gave us the opportunity to explore our options for the future and what our groups thought was realistic for the congregation. We considered how well our present ministries and mission match the community’s needs. **There was a general consensus that we do not, as a congregation, know precisely what the needs of the community are. Although we generally understand and accept the existence of ample needs and mission opportunities in our community, we are mostly unaware of them or have not yet focused on them.**

After considering the possible options suggested by New Beginnings for moving forward, the consensus was that we do not want to close, redevelop, put ourselves up for adoption, or enter into a parallel start, restart or relocate. That left us with a choice of either redefining our mission (mission redefinition) or doing nothing at all to address the changing conditions.

There is a consensus that we cannot do nothing. Although there is general agreement that we need to change in order to accommodate the changing conditions, we are unable to articulate what we

need to do as a congregation to adapt to these changing conditions. Some perceived the need to focus on adding to what the church is doing as opposed to taking away from our current activities.

Session 6 – Navigating Change

Session 6 began with the reading of Matthew 25:14-27, the story of servants with talents. This parable focuses on how servants marshal and utilize resources which are entrusted to them.

In focusing on the discernment process, the overall consensus is that to become vital to our community, we should embark on a process to redefine our mission using the talents we have been entrusted with by God. This will include research to determine community needs and our resources to address them. We attached as Appendix A our parking lot ideas which were floated during the small group meetings for purposes of improving and addressing the changes discussed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the consensus developed from our small group holy conversations, we recommend that the session adopt the following three-part proposal:

- 1. Reflect on and evaluate our current community engagement in conversation with *The Externally Focused Church*, with the goal of bringing back a report to the session at its September meeting.**

The Externally Focused Church is a practical, how-to book written with two types of churches in mind: (1) churches who are already externally focused in what they do, but want to learn what others are doing so they can broaden and deepen their impact in the community; and (2) churches that have heard about the growing external focus and want more information on how to become an externally focused church.

This conversation would be co-facilitated by our pastor and a member of the Leadership Team, meeting on a regular basis at the same location throughout the summer.

Participants would include the Session, its Committees and the Leadership Team.

The goal would be to have participants read the book and engage in conversations that would help produce a written evaluation of our current community engagement and recommendations for how we can become “the best church *for* our community.”¹ Based on this report, we would examine and revise, as needed, our current purpose and vision statement and then develop a strategic plan to implement them.

- 2. Investigate resources for community engagement available through existing community organizations, the Presbytery of Baltimore, the Wild, Wild West Ministry Group and the PC (USA).**
- 3. Prayerfully consider and prioritize the implementation of ideas listed in Appendix A in accordance with our current purpose and vision statements, understanding that they may be revised later this year.**

¹ Eric Swanson & Rick Rusaw, in their follow up to *The Externally Focused Church: Becoming the Best Church for the Community*, distinguish between being the best church *in* the community and being the best church *for* the community (Swanson and Rusaw, *The Externally Focused Quest*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

APPENDIX A (Jeff Getty)

“Parking Lot” ideas:

1. Outreach to seniors;
2. Working family daycare;
3. Unite with other churches in mission activities;
4. Community gardens;
5. Incremental changes;
6. Change should be activity based.

APPENDIX A (Pam Jan)

How would it look different if we chose to whole-heartedly join God in this mission?

1. Spirit
2. Smiling
3. Hands dirty
4. Communicating collaboratively
5. UNITED toward goals & mission
6. Vibrant
7. Energy
8. Vision
9. Prayer circles
10. Homeless (using our church in the situation)
11. Outside our walls sowing seeds
12. Partners with churches
13. Diverse
14. Better Christians & purpose (us & community)
15. Energetic sounds – music, discussions, laughter, celebrations
16. Full of life & people
17. Continually discerning
18. Rebels with a cause

APPENDIX B (Pam Jan)

PARKING LOT – GOD SIZED DREAMS

1. Add more contemporary music to services
2. Open our doors to the homeless and become a shelter in the winter
3. Add ministry to SLB
4. Change lives
5. No prisons
6. Kids, kids – healthy and happy
7. 1,000 member diverse congregation
8. Multiple worship services to serve everyone's needs
9. Children having confidence that life can be better☺
10. Continue to be nice while we get known as the “doing” church
11. Fill pews
12. Other churches joined together – multi-denominational
13. Be a leader in education
14. KKK—No Zone
15. Poverty/drugs are minimal
16. Healthy food for everyone

APPENDIX C (Pam Jan)

What is important for me to tell the committee?

1. We need to read The Externally Focused Church
2. We fear nothing will come of NB – prove us wrong
3. We want to get started
4. We need to visit S. Minster
5. Anything we do needs to be decided with discernment and prayer
6. We need to build relationships
7. Listen to MANY ideas to figure out possibilities
8. WE ARE READY TO FLY

APPENDIX A (Julie Courtney)

Invite people from “neighborhoods” to share their life perspective

- professional / talent brainstorming

- technical support unique to the talents of our members

- coordinate efforts with other missional churches

- facilitator: matching / mentoring to help people improve employment

- P.S.A.s (??)

- help meet needs such as: estate planning, child care, living wills, nutritional counseling, wellness, reduce inactivity (sedentary lifestyles), reduce isolation (transportation), child/teen expenses such as participation in sports, prom clothes, back to school needs, computers, home maintenance and teaching people to maintain their homes, entertainment info, coordination of events, food/hunger, homelessness/available housing (decent), medical, dental, addictions, Political disparity in state of Maryland, leadership training, tutoring / afterschool

- Fill all the Greene Street buildings with businesses with the help of our congregational skill sets

- bring friends to church (friends with children)

- eliminate child hunger in our county (also clothing and shoes)

- adopt West Side School, everything from Grandparents Day, to saving Box Tops for Education and Campbell Soup labels

- Mentoring program for West Side parents – financial, parenting, ...

- ask local cleaners to distribute their excessed clothing

- address transportation needs (especially for Seniors)

- take time to have conversations with groups to discover who they really are and push away our stereotyping

- Saturday evening service for younger people – more contemporary

- Get to know our church neighbors “on the hill” by suggesting a common service three times during the summer – one at each church with all three congregations attending.

- Recommend reading Charles M. Sheldon’s “In His Steps” to give a somewhat dated, but better view of how lives can change living under the motto “What would Jesus do?”

APPENDIX A (Mike Levitas)

“Parking Lot” ideas:

1. Buy and staff a van to pick-up interested people who cannot drive and who want to attend our worship service.
2. Develop excellent contemporary music in worship, just as we have excellent traditional music in worship already.
3. Move the organ to the front of the sanctuary, with the choir, so that the congregation can see them and also so that we feel more together as a congregation during worship.
4. Consider a ministry to help local kids get into Allegany College (tutoring, mentoring)
5. Consider a ministry to help young people in poverty with educational help.
6. Develop parallel services for youth, such as a Wednesday night youth service once a month.
7. Dedicate a staff member to work on publicity/information technology/marketing
8. Develop special speakers’ nights or motivational lectures or revivals, like when Peter Marshall spoke at our church and many people attended.

“Messages to the Leadership”:

1. We agree that in general we do not need “bold changes” in ministry and that we are not in dire straits as a congregation. However, we do need bold action for attracting and satisfying the religious needs of youth and young families.
2. Consider alternative times for services, such as Friday evening and such as two services on Sunday, perhaps one contemporary and one traditional.

APPENDIX A (Lisa McIndoe)

1. Using our abundant talents: caring, hospitality, music (youth) and art are great ways to involve people in our Church and to give back to our community
2. Offering our talents to the community at no cost - FREE
3. Holding a Learning Camp or a Summer Fun Camp (as opposed to calling it “Vacation Bible School” to bring youth into our Church
4. Participating with our neighbor churches
5. Starting a Youth Night– Friday night
6. Our “faces” must be out there in our community
7. Using our South Westminster building – partnership with this church
8. Working with Elementary School Children – we have neighborhood elementary schools
9. Movie night: Wow – hold it outside in the Parking lot, even!
10. Uniting our Bell Choir (Calvary United Methodist, Ridgeley, WV has bells that have never been used, and some have expressed interest in learning and working with our group) – Nancy Hodges to pursue)
11. Starting an evening Bible Study group – we can’t all go to Mark’s Café on Wednesday at Noon
12. Expressing our “inclusiveness” – do we need outward signs that we are welcoming to senior citizens, singles, LBGT, etc.
13. Block party! Let’s do it!
14. Hosting and inviting in contemporary worship bands – or starting one of our own
15. Living out our Purpose and Vision!

Our Group’s Overall Message to Leadership:

As a congregation, we are blessed with talents, our building, and financial resources. We believe we have passion and enthusiasm for our individual and united mission. We are eager and willing to pursue some new ideas. We do not believe extreme, bold changes are required in our immediate future. We believe in our Purpose and Vision as currently expressed, and we feel we must unify to proactively live our Purpose and Vision.

We enjoyed our New Beginning’s experience, and we are thankful for the opportunity we had to get to know each other better through our shared experience.