

First Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Illinois
August, 2015

2015 MISSION STUDY REPORT

Call Discernment Team Members: Anne Meyer, Harvey Stephens, Randy Wiseman
Resource Assistance: The Reverend Charlotte Poetschner

Introduction

In January 2015, shortly after announcing his intention to retire as our pastor, the Reverend Clifford Hayes suggested to the Session that the groundwork necessary to complete our Mission Study could begin well before his June departure. Reverend Hayes proposed that a team be appointed to structure and implement a process for conducting the Mission Study. The Session elected Anne Meyer, Harvey M. Stephens, Paul Stromdahl, and Randy Wiseman to serve in this capacity and hired the Reverend Charlotte Poetschner to assist the team. The newly elected group adopted the title of Call Discernment Team (“the team”) and began meeting weekly to carry out its task.

The team sketched out a process for developing the Mission Study report for approval by the Session and the Committee on Ministry, and ultimately for use by the Pastor Nominating Committee (“the PNC.”) Recognizing that the purpose of a Mission Study is to explore who we are, who God is calling us to be, and how we respond to God’s call as a congregation, the team placed great importance on providing opportunities for all members of the congregation to participate in the process. The team felt that this was especially crucial during a period of transition after the departure of a beloved pastor.

An early suggestion had been floated that should the Mission Study be completed before Reverend Hayes’s departure it might be possible to compress the transition process. In this scenario, we could appoint a PNC and call a new Installed Pastor without availing ourselves of the customary one year tenure of an Interim Pastor. Reverend Hayes himself had been selected and hired during his predecessor’s tenure, and the two had served as co-pastors for six months, without the need for an Interim. As Reverend Hayes had given ample notice of his impending departure, would it be possible to use the same model for transition to a new pastor in 2015?

The team was charged with exploring this possibility and making a recommendation to the Session regarding its feasibility. After due consideration it became clear that hiring an Interim or Transitional Pastor and taking advantage of the transition period—though possibly as short as six months rather than the customary one year—would be more appropriate to prepare the way for our new pastor. The Session then tasked the team with soliciting and interviewing candidates for the Transitional Pastor position.

Methodology

The team selected a series of exercises designed to elicit input from a broad cross section of the congregation.

- Leadership Competency Form

Reverend Hayes suggested that we make use of this form, intended as part of the computer matching process, to prompt members' reflection not only on the gifts they sought in a new pastor, but also on the gifts they personally could contribute to the mission of the church. This form was mailed or distributed in person to the congregation and staff. Sixty-eight forms were returned.

- SWOT Analysis

The team conducted a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis first with our team, then with staff, then with the Board of Deacons and Session combined. Finally, during the worship service on four consecutive Sundays, the congregation was asked to consider each one of the SWOT categories. Time was provided for the congregation's prayerful reflection before collecting the responses during the offertory. Nearly 70 responses were received.

- Coffee Conversations

The team invited five church leaders to host conversations in their homes, over coffee and dessert. A signup sheet was posted in the fellowship hall, announcements were made during worship services and in the bulletin, and an email was sent to members encouraging their participation. An average of ten members of the congregation attended each event. Two members of the team led the discussion by posing five questions designed to gain further insight into the congregation's thoughts with regard to the past and the future of the Church. (See Appendix A.) All answers were recorded and collated.

- Life Cycle of a Church

With the assistance of Reverend Poetschner, the team led the Session in an exercise charting the life cycle of our church. The Session overwhelmingly agreed that we are in the rebirth phase of the life cycle curve.

- Community Involvement Survey

In order to provide a picture of the varied activities of our membership, the team surveyed the congregation during worship with regard to individual community involvement.

- Demographics

Working with the church Administrative Assistant Chris Wheal, Paul Stromdahl assembled statistics required for the Ministry Information Form. (See Appendix B.)

- Exit Interview

Representing the Committee on Ministry, the Reverend Adam Quine conducted an exit interview with the Session at its May meeting. While the interview questions focused primarily on the impact of Reverend Hayes's tenure as pastor, responses did point to hopes and priorities for our future as a church.

Throughout the past six months, the team has given regular updates on its progress during Sunday worship and has been available to any member of the congregation to answer questions and listen to suggestions and concerns. The team has been very gratified by the congregation's whole hearted participation in this process and by the many comments we have received about its transparency. We intended to use these exercises as a means to an end, to give us data that would reveal patterns and trends for this report, and this did happen. But beyond that, we found that the exercises were valuable to the transition process in encouraging reflection and starting conversations about who we are as God's church, regardless of who we engage to be our pastor.

Common Threads

The team has reviewed all of the data collected and believes that the following summary presents an honest picture of First Presbyterian Church and its mission for the future. The summary does not try to quantify each and every response received, but instead identifies those broad areas in which significant consensus exists. These overall themes were consistent throughout all of the exercises, regardless of how the question was posed or the composition of the sample group.

Our Caring and Diverse Church Family

The congregation of First Presbyterian Church views itself as inclusive and welcoming towards all people in the Springfield community. Our genuine, nonjudgmental celebration of diversity has attracted members looking for a church home where people across the political spectrum can worship together without acrimonious debate of social issues.

For much of our past, a high percentage of our members were affluent professionals and executives. Although our members continue to come from zip codes where incomes and education levels are higher than average, we are no longer seen as a stronghold for the elite. People of many different backgrounds worship comfortably with each other within our church family. Many of our members have at one time worked for the State of Illinois and have a keen awareness of a wide range of social and political issues. Homeless people often worship with us as well, and join us for coffee hour. Some of our members have formed personal relationships with individuals in need, some of whom have become members themselves.

We have members of every age and household composition. Our older members inspire with their continued involvement. In the past few years we have gained many empty nesters and recently retired people who have vital experience and energy to contribute. Many lament that the percentage of younger families is lower than in the past, and call for more programs to attract and retain this group. At the same time, most appreciate our focus on dynamic worship within a supportive intergenerational setting, rather than trying to compete with the entertaining activities offered by many mega churches.

The congregation has proven itself willing to accept changes within our denomination and society in a compassionate, friendly, and welcoming manner. This has allowed us to avoid church wide conflict with regard to issues that in the past, and in other churches, have posed significant obstacles to long term sustainability. In particular, our church has been intentionally open to the perspectives and gifts of LGBTQ individuals. We are members of Covenant Network and More Light Presbyterians and openly profess our support for our LGBTQ members and friends. Although some members continue to struggle with our denomination's rapidly evolving

positions on same sex marriage and the ministry of LGBTQ people, few members have left the congregation solely due to these issues, and indeed, several new members have cited our position as a reason to join.

We are also diverse in our understanding of God. People at many different places in their faith journey are at home here, realizing that questioning, doubt, and imperfection are no bar to growing in the knowledge and love of God. We experience God in the many ways we reach out to each other during times of need. “My low point was also my high point,” one member observed, describing how a health crisis made her realize the spiritual impact we have on each other that goes beyond Sunday morning.

Newcomers frequently comment on how many people greeted them and showed an interest in them. As they continue to worship with us, they find a community where “people are who they are all the time. There are no facades or fakes.” The result is a congregation engaging in a powerful, positive, spiritual openness, working towards a deeper understanding of its mission in the community.

Dynamic Worship, Preaching, and Music

Grounded in but not limited to familiar and beloved traditions, our classic form of worship has been continually enhanced by the innovative use of many genres of music, visual arts, and drama. On any given Sunday, the Scriptures might be proclaimed by heart, or interwoven with contemporary texts. A classical organ piece might be followed by Native American flute or a contemporary Christian solo. An artist might complete a mural during the sermon. These eclectic elements are not introduced solely to spice things up or to make church “cool,” but to speak to the hearts of all members of our diverse community, that all might be drawn closer to God.

Over the years we have been blessed with excellent preaching and have come to expect sermons that are thought provoking, well written and delivered. And indeed, whether lectionary based or in response to current events and issues, the vast majority of sermons preached from our pulpit have been intellectually grounded.

We expect attention to excellence, so that every element of our worship is fitting to give glory to God. Our small but dedicated core choir is joined by choral scholars from Millikin University, giving a boost to our congregational hymn singing and allowing for the presentation of a more challenging anthem repertoire. Many of our members and friends lend their talents as soloists, and our magnificent pipe organ and fine acoustics attract many guest artists. A projection system is sometimes used to visually complement other components of the service.

While many of our members have a preference for certain styles of worship, most, especially newcomers, readily admit that the variety experienced in our services is one factor in our continued vitality and growth. Our core value of inclusivity is reinforced when different perspectives are given a voice in our worship service, and all feel a powerful spiritual message.

Our Historic Setting

We treasure our past. Since 1828, through changes of address, construction and remodeling of our facilities, turnover in pastors, and fluctuation in numbers, First Presbyterian Church has been an influential presence in Springfield. The caring presence of our pastor attracted Abraham Lincoln and his family in 1850, and our role as Lincoln's church continues to attract scholars and admirers of our 16th president, many of whom become members. We have been the church home of many people of influence, including Adlai Stevenson and Otto Kerner. We have interpreted our proximity to political power as a responsibility to take the lead in promoting social justice. Our church began a free health care clinic on our premises, and was involved in resettling immigrants from Southeast Asia. Many of our long-time members have a generational connection to these formative stories.

We treasure our building. The aesthetics of our beautiful 19th century sanctuary with its Tiffany, Pittsburgh, and Willet stained glass windows provide a very spiritual atmosphere for worship and reflection. It is natural to feel a kinship with those who passed through this space before us, and some of our members have commented that they felt motivated to do God's work by these surroundings.

This connection between building, living history, and God's work is warmly demonstrated during our annual 1850s Community Carol Sing. In 2014, almost 300 guests, many in period dress, filled our sanctuary and we were proud to present their offering of over \$2,600 to our local Salvation Army. We also welcome many visitors from around the world each summer for tours led by our church docents. While most come to see the Lincoln pew and the Tiffany windows, we emphasize that we are not a relic of a bygone age but a living church, charged by God to love and care for His children.

Stirring as our identification with the past can be, it comes with modern-day fiscal and accessibility issues. Maintaining a historic building involves frequent and often unexpected costs. The greatest test of our commitment came in the 1950s when an engineering study revealed that our sanctuary was not structurally sound and was in danger of collapse. The

congregation was faced with deciding whether it was time to abandon the building and build a new facility elsewhere, impacting our worship space as well as our direct ministry in the central city. Not only did we decide to stay and reinforce our sanctuary, but in the 1960s we added office and education wings, and in the 1990s we held a capital campaign to purchase and install our master-built Brombaugh Opus 35 organ. Clearly, our church intends to cherish its setting for many years to come.

Engaging with Our Community and the World

Our downtown location has spurred us to take the lead in many outreach programs. We see the face of God in the urban poor, especially the homeless who come to our doors on a daily basis. In direct response to their need, we operate the Samaritan Ministry social service desk and the Deacons' Food Pantry. This ministry is blessed with dedicated volunteers who shop, deliver food, stock our shelves, and greet our guests.

We were a founding member of Sangamon County Habitat for Humanity, and we continue to contribute resources and labor to home builds. Other organizations which we have supported financially or with volunteers include:

- Matheny-Withrow Elementary School
- Salvation Army
- Homeless United for Change
- Caregivers Interfaith Volunteer Services
- Meals on Wheels
- Springfield Pridefest
- Contact Ministries
- Fair Hills Residence (Illinois Presbyterian Home)
- Mitten Tree

We struggle to hear God's call for us in a world wounded by racism and injustice. Reverend Hayes's friendship with the pastor of New Mission Church of God, an African American church in Springfield, led to a connection between our churches. Members of this sister church join us for worship on several Sundays during the year, and we picnic together each summer.

Our members are interested in God's world beyond our borders. A 2001 grassroots initiative to build a relationship with a Presbyterian church in Sancti Spiritus, Cuba has blossomed into a true partnership, with both churches sharing faith, hospitality, friendship, resources, and understanding. We have supported the efforts of a member family from Laos in responding to a need for a new school/church in their home community.

In addition to participating in church sponsored outreach, many of our individual members are actively engaged in ministries in their workplaces and volunteer settings. A few examples of organizations our members support are:

- Priscilla's Lost and Found
- Springfield Overflow Shelter
- Sister Cities Association of Springfield
- Little Free Library
- Lincoln Land Adult Education & Literacy
- Sertoma Club
- Church Women United
- Land of Lincoln Honor Flights
- Dining for Women
- Boy Scouts
- American Red Cross
- Hospice
- American Association of University Women
- Springfield Art Association Art Outreach

Our Mission

- + Nurtured by God's love as expressed by our caring and diverse church family...
- + Emboldened by God's Word as expressed in our dynamic preaching, worship, and music...
- + Inspired by our past as expressed in the aesthetics of our historic building...

First Presbyterian Church goes forth into the world to do God's work. Committed to worship and service in downtown Springfield, we seek to embrace the community that surrounds us. We are called to serve people in need, working for peace and justice. We value the diversity of God's people, and we value each individual journey. *Everyone is welcome at God's table.*

Caring for Each Other

Visiting the sick, comforting those who mourn, and standing with those in crisis are clearly among the most important duties of a pastor, and our Mission Study exercises showed that our members place high priority on this area of competency. Our pastors have been exemplary models of caring, but as our membership ages we cannot depend solely on our clergy to meet these needs —nor should we if we are truly a family in Christ. The Home Communion ministry is one formalized way we respond to members in need. Could we develop more networks of caring for each other?

Respecting Diversity

There was overwhelming consensus that our church has become stronger as a result of respecting the dignity of every person. We have been greatly enriched by the gifts of those in our midst from different walks of life, racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and faith journeys. Could we do more to be a place where all people feel free to share their stories and listen to each other? Could we be examples of peacemaking to those whose families or faith communities have been torn apart by disagreements on social and political issues?

Extending a Welcome

Almost every respondent to the Mission Study agreed that our biggest attraction to new members is the warm welcome we extend to all who worship with us. We respond eagerly to newcomers, and quickly enfold them into the life of the church. It is easy to pat ourselves on the back and assume that we are doing all we can—or to leave it up to the pastor. Could we develop an intentional approach to responding to newcomers? Could we create more opportunities to get to know each other better beyond Sunday mornings?

Worshiping God

Creative... Diverse... Unpredictable...

Innovative... Interesting... Traditional yet Imaginative...

These are some of the ways members have tried to describe our worship service in recent years. Somewhat surprisingly for an institution that so strongly prides itself on its past, no respondents wanted to seize the chance offered by a transitional period to do away with more recent additions to our worship service. Our worship has always used time honored rituals and traditions, and there were no calls to do away with these treasured elements either. Instead, members seemed in agreement that God gives us many ways to proclaim His Word, so that all might hear. A few members proposed separate services, either occasionally or on a regular basis, with contemporary music to attract different (eg, younger) groups of people, and at hours more convenient to families. Others were doubtful that a congregation of our size could support separate services, and some worried that additional services could split the congregation into groups that rarely cross paths. Could we find ways to build upon the strength of our worship to bring more people into our church family?

Embracing Our Community

Our congregation identifies strongly with its urban setting. Not surprisingly, responses to all four categories of the SWOT exercise mentioned our setting in the heart of downtown. Our central, highly visible location is a *Strength*. Our isolation from most members' neighborhoods and our lack of parking are *Weaknesses*. The loss of state employees from downtown offices is a *Threat*. But what about *Opportunities*?

Many of our members see opportunity in the future of downtown Springfield as a residential setting. Along with those who attend special downtown events like the Old Capitol Art Fair and the Route 66 festival, many of us have become accustomed to shopping at the farmers market. Going downtown has become a regular part of our week. We already have several members who live downtown and enjoy walking to church. Could we take advantage of this trend and become a neighborhood church as well as a destination church?

We also have the opportunity to serve God when we see Him in the many needy people who find home, resources, and refuge in downtown Springfield. Could we take further advantage of this opportunity to expand our own offerings or to grow as advocates for the disadvantaged?

Committing to our Historic Setting

Our strong identification with the past has drawbacks as well as advantages. At every stage of the Mission Study process, our members have addressed the importance of our historic building to the life of the church and the community. We are firmly committed to continuing our ministry from this sacred urban space. We are less certain of what this commitment might entail and how it might mesh with our overall mission.

Our physical setting has never been frozen in time. The current sanctuary is our third and has itself undergone significant renovations, some involving total reconfiguration of the interior space in response to congregational growth patterns and evolving worship needs. Extensive additions have been made to the facility without regard for accessibility, and without foreseeing decline in numbers. Maintaining an older building and physical plant involves frequent, large, and unpredictable expenditures. We pray to discern God's call as we decide how to be responsible stewards of this unique place.

An Enviably Resource

In the 1990s our church leaders had the foresight to convert a property we owned behind our parking lot to a modern office building currently leased by the U.S. Attorney's Office. To manage this property, the church created the St Andrews Corporation. All of the income after expenses from St Andrews is income to First Presbyterian Church. In 2014, that income accounted for 28% of our budget. The mortgage on this building will be paid off by the end of 2017, and negotiations are under way for the renewal of the current lease on the building. We foresee a potential income stream which could allow us to expand our ministries as never before.

In anticipation of this possibility, Session/Finance Committee has adopted a process for allocating monies realized from St Andrews. There has been an informal understanding that these monies would be used for "mission." Several ambitious new ministries have been suggested, including a community center to serve new downtown residents; an arts center with studio and practice space to serve artists and musicians; and a day center to serve the homeless. Other members take a broader view of the term mission to encompass long deferred building upkeep and improvements to allow it to continue to serve and inspire us. A few even dream of a full scale rebuilding of our education wing to make our facility fully accessible to all. Can we develop a plan to use this resource wisely to the glory of God?

The process adopted by Session insures that until we become a prosperous church—one able to pay its expenses without drawing from reserves—we cannot begin to use St Andrews money for ambitious new projects. One thrust of our 2014 stewardship campaign was to issue a wakeup call to the congregation. We had been using the savings of those who went before us to cover our day-to-day operating expenses. We had come to rely increasingly on the savings of those in the past and the expectation of a St Andrews windfall in the future as a substitute for ongoing personal commitment to the community of God—pledging. The congregation responded very positively to this campaign: both the number and dollar amount of pledges rose significantly. Can we continue to strengthen our members' financial commitment to the church?

Discerning God's Call

During the Mission Study process many members commented that they like First Presbyterian Church *just as it is* and do not see the need for any changes. Some of these same members may have expressed this same desire the last time we faced a transition in pastors. Yet much has changed over the intervening ten years! So instead of indicating that our congregation has an aversion to change, such comments prove that our congregation is actually quite adaptable.

The common threads gleaned from all responses to the Mission Study reflect the positive attitude and morale of the congregation. We like each other, we like our setting, and we look forward to being together here for a long time. Can we use this optimism to overcome the societal reality of long term decline in statistical measures? Or is God calling us to grow, not necessarily in numbers, but in strength? Can we build on our strengths—our caring relationships, our dynamic worship, our historic setting, and our engagement with the community—to be the people God is calling us to be?

Appendix A: Coffee Conversations Discussion Questions

One member of the Call Discernment team served as moderator and posed the following questions at each Coffee and Dessert Conversation. Another team member recorded the responses.

1. In your association with First Presbyterian Church you have more than likely experienced some specific high points and perhaps a low point. Please share with us the story of either a high point or a low point and describe how our congregation helped you to connect with God. Maybe it was during a time when you felt most alive, involved, and fulfilled. In contrast, maybe it was during a time when you felt detached or isolated, perhaps missing something from your life. In either case, please tell us why you felt this way, and how being a part of this church affected your experience. What was it about our church that either helped you celebrate your high point or helped you overcome your low point?
2. Every church today must constantly change, transform and grow with God's radical call. But vibrant congregations also, in the midst of change, know how to preserve their "positive core". What, in your view, are the three most important values or strengths of First Presbyterian Church – those most precious principles, qualities, and practices from our past and present – that you want us to keep and preserve, even as we move into a new and changing future?
3. Dreaming big, what giant step do you wish the congregation would take together to become more alive with God's Spirit, to move forward in response to God's call?
4. Name one small step -- one that you are willing to take – that would help this congregation answer God's call to the future.
5. What do you most want a future pastor to know about First Presbyterian Church?

Appendix B: Demographic Report

Very simply stated, the members of congregation of First Presbyterian Church are predominantly white, older, much better educated and earn more than the average Springfielder. To a large part this statement is based on comparing member zip codes by count to an analysis of demographics broken down by zip codes.

The majority of our members are from the following zip codes:

62701, Downtown, (3+-)
62702, North end, (20+-) 7%
62703, Eastside, (33+-) 11%
62704, Westside City, (96+-) 37%
62707, Outside City, the North arc, (6+-)
62711, New West, (20+-) 7%
62712, Lakeside, (17+-) 7%

The largest number looking from 2008 to 2014 is the Westside City including Leland Grove. This is the area with the greatest population density, small household size, highest education level (18% with graduate degrees), a high degree of stable home ownership and slight to no growth.

We also have members in some of the surrounding communities well within driving distance such as Rochester, Sherman and Chatham. These lie just outside a six mile radius of the church or about a 15 minute drive. The vast majority of our congregation lives within this six mile radius, and almost all drive by one of five other Presbyterian Churches before arriving at ours.

The membership at First Presbyterian has been decreasing for at least the last 50 years, like most churches who hit their peak at the height of the baby boom. One only has to look at the size of physical plant to realize that. We are a part of the move away from established main line churches, religion in general and a reduction in birth rates; families go back to church when they have children.

Springfield is not a terribly diverse city; our population breaks down as follows:

White, 76% (Illinois 78%),
Black, 18.5% (Illinois 15%),
Asian, 2% (Illinois 5%),
Hispanic, 2% (Illinois 16/5%).

It is also not growing, with only a 3% increase since 2000. During this period of time state government has experienced a notable reduction in employees in both attrition and the movement of jobs to Chicago. Within the last four years two employers of note have left, the ATT and AIG call centers that employed at one time around 400 people.