

# **First Presbyterian Church of Titusville**

## **Congregational Mission Study**

**September 2017**

### **Vision and Mission**

What is the church's vision for ministry to itself, the local community, and the world? What vision does it have for establishing a new relationship with a new pastor? Where does the congregation think God is leading the church?

The responses from the focus groups indicate that the First Presbyterian Church of Titusville seeks to be a place not only where a diversity of style, talents, and forms of worship are held, expressed, and respected, but where all are united in their belief in Christ and his gospel.

Galatians 2: (19-21)

The difficulty of differing interpretation of Christianity manifested itself in the church's struggle with homosexuality. In the last six years the Session has made the decisions to not discriminate based on sexual orientation in the ordination of deacons and elders and in the sacred covenant of marriage. As a result, some members have chosen to halt their worship with the congregation on Sunday mornings. Still many others have stayed to continue the conversation. People are still worshipping together, participating in fellowship with each other, and caring for each other. The decisions of the Session were not easy and not received without controversy by the congregation.

The focus groups indicate the divergences of views and experiences of Christianity. In response to the question about members' hopes for the congregation in ten years, the set of responses beyond growth focused on the development of different theological stances. One group

of responses included observations like, “conservatives need to be listened to,” “must not preach liberalism from the pulpit,” should “get back to the Bible.” Another group of respondents, by contrast, emphasized the need for “more open-mindedness,” greater “acceptance of diversity,” “more active, vibrant forward looking” leaders. Though these comments imply a different way of looking at the church’s future, we continually want to be a place where our love for each other and for humankind through Christ is greater than our differences.

Our vision to love continually and care for each other is expressed in the priority of membership care from the surveys and comments from the focus groups. Overwhelmingly, the survey indicated that care is a high priority for the members of the church. Care includes visiting each other, being aware of who is ill, taking communion to those unable to attend church, prayer groups and prayer chains, and generally attending to the physical and spiritual needs of each other. When asked in focus groups about what makes you most proud about this church, many emphasized the people of the congregation using phrases like “Love among the congregation,” “Love for each other,” “friendliness and mutual support.” Several responses specifically mentioned the friendliness and helpfulness of the church staff.

Our commitment to Jesus Christ further reveals itself in our desire to maintain a vibrant worship experience. Worship involves Biblical teaching, praise, music, fellowship, prayer, and laity involvement. Session boldly combined the part-time positions of music director, bell choir director, and children’s choir director into one position. The church emphasizes involving all ages in the various music groups.

The congregation’s vision for ministry goes beyond the membership: it extends to all who enter as well as to our local community and to the world, regardless of lifestyle, beliefs, age, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, or past experiences. The vision includes, but is not limited to,

community outreach, youth mission trips, and donated time and dollars to serving the needy and infirm. The congregation has a particular warmth for its youth mission trips. For over thirty years the youth have gone on summer mission trips every other year.

After 42 years of a pastorate graced by God, the congregation is moving forward to form a new relationship with a new pastor. This transition is not easy. It involves a sense of loss and hope for the future. There is some clarity about the congregation's and Session's vision. The congregation, particularly members of Session, are moving toward a collaborative style of ministry in which the many strengths and talents of the members and the pastor are utilized to develop and to implement initiatives. What form this collaborative style will take is not known presently since it is still in development. The form will be shaped by the skills and aptitude of the next minister. The minister will be the leader in helping the church reach its vision and mission goals, but it is clear that the expectation of the Session and members is that they will be active partners in determining and fulfilling that vision and those goals.

### **Strengths and Challenges**

What are the strengths of the congregation in fulfilling its vision? What challenges does it face? What is often a strength in one context, can also be a challenge in another context. Further, this section does not discuss all of the strengths and challenges of the church and their paradoxical relationships. It merely highlights those that are most important to this institution in its current position and that may have the most importance for its future.

#### Strengths

1. During the interim periods, Session members have assumed greater responsibilities and as a group are willing to discuss and debate issues facing the church, make decisions, make changes, and to constantly look forward. This has started with the empowerment of

committees. Committees have become completely laity led. The Christian Education Committee has diligently worked to overhaul the Christian education program in light of declining numbers of children and thinking of better ways to reach youth and adults. In addition monthly communion is served in various ways. Before the first interim pastor arrived, the Evangelism Committee had already recommended the elimination of approximately 300 members from the active membership roll. The Session, under the leadership of the Building and Grounds Committee, has approved at least \$60,000 in spending for deferred maintenance. Finally, the Session has re-established a Stewardship Subcommittee. Laity involvement in worship services has been expanded. In addition to the music groups, laity read scripture, read litanies, and lead the congregation in prayer. Session members during the fall and winter months also generally provide updates to the congregation about the activities of their committees.

2. The involvement of persons in Christian Education activities in the broad sense has been relatively steady until recently. Though Sunday school numbers have declined, many established groups in the congregation such as the men's breakfast, women's Bible studies, chancel choir, bell choir, and participation in youth groups has been relatively consistent. The youth groups not only consist of the sons and daughters of members, but also of the friends of those teenagers and others who are not associated with the church in any other way. The church views this as part of its mission of service. Finally, a number of persons attend the five family night dinners that are held Wednesday evenings each autumn and during Lent.
3. The surveys and comments from focus groups indicate a strong commitment to the education of children and youth. The church supports a bi-annual youth mission trip. For

twenty-five years the youth went to a home for the disabled in Florida. In 2015 the youth went to a Presbyterian mission in Kentucky. In 2017 the mission was to the Broad Street ministry in Philadelphia. The youth look forward to this educational experience each year. This is also evidenced by the extreme dedication of the Christian Education Committee to develop learning outcomes, to bring in experts to discuss Christian Education with committee members, and to expand the conversation about programs with the congregation. The church's participation in Vacation Bible School and children's carnivals is a good indicator of the church's commitment to children's education.

4. Recent decisions on sexual orientation for elder or deacon ordination and for marriage ceremonies have affirmed our belief that all church members have the same privileges and responsibilities of membership.
5. The First Presbyterian Church of Titusville dates its founding back to the early years of Titusville, Pennsylvania. The church has a 200 year history within the Titusville community. Along with that history is a beautifully constructed and historical sanctuary with many additions to the original structure over the years. The architecture and the stained glass windows are gorgeous. The pride that the focus group participants expressed about the history, traditions, place of the church within the community, and the beauty of the buildings is well founded. A heritage committee has been formed to preserve and promote the church's history.
6. The church has an endowment and trusts which provide a foundation of revenue on which the church can build. The endowment was established in 1968 and is currently worth \$1.7 million. Over the last five years it has provided an average of \$44,713 a year in income. The trusts, which are managed by an external investment firm and in which

the church is one of the beneficiaries, provide on average about \$120,000 for use by the church. This provides a foundation on which other revenue from member contributions and other sources can be developed.

### Challenges

1. Our elementary after school programs remain strong, but like many churches we face challenges attracting teenagers.
2. With the retirement of a pastor of 42 years of service, the First Presbyterian Church of Titusville entered a period of significant transition and exploration. The church experienced problems during the transition period. As expected, emotions have been running high throughout the congregation. The first interim resigned after 18 months. At his recommendation the session contracted with Lombard Mennonite Peace Center to work with the congregation on conflict resolution. A second interim was called and she has had a calming influence on our congregation and has allowed us to move forward.
3. The decisions of the Session since 2012 to be inclusive have been difficult. Some members have decided not to attend weekly worship regularly. It also may explain comments from some in focus groups that the church is not biblically sound, it needs to go back to biblical principles. This will continue to be a struggle.
4. Membership and attendance are challenges for the church. In 2014, the Session culled the official membership roll by 300 members. That left the congregation with a total membership of 405. Worship attendance began to decline in 2011, reducing the attendance to 80 in 2017.
5. Communication during this time of change is a challenge. To this end, session has recognized its need to frequently explain the decisions of its committees to keep the congre-

gation informed. The church produces a monthly newsletter (The Tower) and maintains a website. The challenge is to find more effective ways of reaching the congregation.

6. Deferred maintenance and the general maintenance of multiple buildings in one connected complex is a challenge. After years of deferring work, issues have been addressed and remedial plans have been made. The general maintenance budget is relatively low yet the facilities must be properly maintained. The budget limitation leads to creativity and burdens for the well-regarded sexton and housekeeper.
7. Although we support local missions with contributions we realize our church needs to become more mission focused and increase our outreach to the community. Matthew 28: (19-20).
8. Budgetary concerns have been central for years. The average contribution of members is low and membership contributions through pledges, loose offerings, and special offerings averages only 36% of the church's revenue. Thus, stewardship is an important challenge. The church needs to decrease its reliance on its endowment.

## **Conclusion**

We believe that as the first congregation in our historically rich community, we stand on the shoulders of a great legacy of hope, faith, service and outreach in our community, and honor Christ, our Lord. We believe that God is calling us not merely to stand on those shoulders, but to create another set of shoulders on which future generations can stand. We want future generations to view us as using the strengths of the church to face contemporary challenges in a healthy and productive way in the service of Jesus Christ, Our Savior and Risen Lord.

## **Guiding Scripture for Future**

Ephesians 4: 11-13

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.