

The Visioning Project

First Presbyterian Church Champaign

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1. Introduction

Late last year Pastor Matt Matthews asked us to undertake a visioning project. We met several times with Pastor Matt to determine such details of the project as when he would like the results, what questions he would like us to explore, and so on. After some initial delays occasioned by health and family concerns, we began this process in late Spring, 2019. During the Summer and early Fall, we appeared before the congregation to explain our project and to ask for their input. We arranged to talk with various groups within the Church¹ and with numerous individuals.² We gave an initial, preliminary report to Session at its September 19, 2019, meeting. We present this report to Session at its October meeting.

We should note that this is not the first attempt at discerning a vision for First Presbyterian. For example, the Church's 2007 Annual Report was, in large part, a report on an "ideation" exercise to try to discern where the Church might be going and where it ought to go.³ We particularly applaud the innovative and comprehensive survey that the producers of the report distributed to the congregation and analyzed.⁴ Additionally, the Moving Forward Team produced a vision-like statement in the Summer of 2012 that has much to admire. Finally, Session undertook a study of the Church's future in Summer, 2018.

We have divided the report into the following sections. In the first section we outline the methodology we used to gather our results. In the second section we present the results that we draw from our surveys of the congregation and Church organizations. That second section has two complementary sections. The first distills the many comments into three broad findings. The second contains many comments on the broad findings and some other matters made to us by the interviewees. There is a brief concluding section and an appendix.

2. Methodology

In our early discussions with Pastor Matt, we had very ambitious ideas of how to gather information from the congregants about the Church's future. We had hoped to be able to talk with many if not most of the congregation. Ideally, we would have been able to talk to those who have left the Church to learn from them why they found another congregation more congenial. We had

¹ We shall capitalize the word "church" when we are referring to First Presbyterian Church Champaign.

² We list and thank the Church organizations and congregants who helped us in Appendix A.

³ See *First Church: 2007 Annual Report: Change* (2008). For example, on pp. 12-13, there are some brief responses to the question "Who Do We Want to Be?" In addition to the other good ideas in the report, we believe that some of the suggestions understandably reflect the struggle that the Church was having in coming to terms with its attempts to be "one church with two campuses."

⁴ *Id.*, at "Survey Summary," pp. 1-67. We could not find statistics in the report on the responsiveness to the detailed survey. Where the number of responses is mentioned, it appears that 21 people submitted responses.

aspirations to talk by phone, by email, by Skype, face-to-face, and, like the authors of the 2007 Annual Report, to develop a Survey Monkey website with questions that would guide respondents to think about their vision for the Church.

In the end, time, the history suggested by the 2007 Report, and the lessons of our first interviews caused us to scale back our ambitions and to take a more limited approach. The principal reasons for not doing more than we have done are two: (1) each face-to-face interview took more time than we had expected – on average, 30 – 60 minutes per interview; and (2) we began to hear the same things from the many people with whom we talked. That is, there seemed to be a widespread consensus about where the Church ought to be in five years.⁵

Relatedly, we did not get a thundering response to our various requests for help. For instance, in response to our appearance at all three services in late August, at which we gave phone numbers and an email address at which to contact us, and a follow-up announcement in the Church newsletter, we had exactly two responses.

Nonetheless, when we approached various people to ask them for a face-to-face interview, people were eager to talk, took the matter very seriously, gave us thoughtful ideas, and generously devoted much greater amounts of their time than we had asked for or expected. We concluded that people love this Church and are very eager to see it prosper.

We proceeded by conducting what survey researchers call a “snowball survey.” That is, we identified several individuals and groups with whom to start our interviews. Then, from those initial interviews we got suggestions about other individuals and groups whom we should approach. The survey simply grew like a rolling snowball. We began with the Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC), a group who had devoted a great deal of time to examining the makeup, strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities of First Presbyterian Church Champaign in order to be in a position to answer questions from pastor-candidates and to identify who among those candidates would be the best fit.⁶

In the end we talked with three groups – the former PNC, the Stephen Ministry group, and Session – and approximately 30 individuals. Our first interviews were face-to-face and that proved to be a very congenial and productive method of having a discussion about where the Church should be going. Those interviews – conducted in homes, coffee shops, Mae Chapin Parlor, and elsewhere – were not a march through a standard set of questions. Rather we began with a brief discussion of what we had been asked to do and then asked the starting question described below. The interviewee’s response began a conversation that led us to explore various aspects of the issues for an average of between 30 and 60 minutes. Several of the interviewees came to our meeting with a thoughtful written document describing their vision. Several sent us follow-up observations.

We took copious notes of each meeting (from which the many quotes in Section 3B below come) and tried to write after each interview to thank the interviewee for his or her time.

The question upon which we settled as the one that fit best with what Pastor Matt had asked us to investigate was this: “Where would you like to see the Church in five years?” In response to the blank looks that this question often elicited, we would elaborate. We distinguished our inquiry from one in which we might have asked for our interviewee’s best guess about what the Church

⁵ This is not to say that we might have learned different things had we been more ambitious in reaching out to more people. People, such as new members or members from different countries, may have different perspectives that would offer different visions. Still, our best guess was that even if we had talked to more and more people, we would have heard much the same things that we had already heard.

⁶ It worked. We found just the right person.

would look like in five years if present trends continued. We asked interviewees to think aspirationally, to focus on what they hoped and wanted the Church to look like in five years. We sometimes said that the point was not to be realistic or pragmatic so much as it was to dream. We invited our interlocutors to think about how we might get from where they now believe the Church to be to their vision for five years hence. We tried to assure those with whom we talked that it was Session, the professional staff, and the congregation that would draw the roadmap from today to 2025. We had hoped that this disclaimer would allow interviewees to concentrate just on the destination that they would like to reach and to avoid worrying about its achievability or practicality.

We are not sure that this was the best way to have conducted the inquiry, but frankly we could not and cannot think of how we might have avoided the limitations into which we ran. What limitations? First, many people have a difficult time thinking aspirationally. Their energies and focus are on the here and now or, perhaps, on the near term. This is not meant to be critical. It makes a great deal of sense to deal with life's situations as one finds them. But we also realize that many people have dreams, not just for their personal lives but for their communities, nations, and the world. They also have dreams for their individual and collective spiritual lives, and we found that if we prodded enough, people were happy to share those spiritual aspirations with us.

Second, we found that most of those with whom we spoke wanted to talk about what is wrong with our Church currently or, less pejoratively, what is most in need of correction. And there was a strong consensus among the group on these matters. However, if the focus of those with whom we talked was our Church's current deficiencies, the focus of their vision for the Church was the correction of those deficits and how we might best do that. Again, we do not mean to be critical, partly because the fault may well have been ours in not pushing our interviewees harder on being aspirational.

Moreover, we must say that even those who wanted to focus on current deficiencies are deep lovers of this Church, strong supporters willing to help the Church grow and prosper, and not sullen or mutinous. Those who have found those deficiencies to be insurmountable have obviously moved on to other Churches.

We should also note that even those who felt most comfortable addressing the current issues in the Church had some very good ideas about how to make the Church a better place. We include those ideas in the following section on results.

3. Results

We divide our discussion of the results of our surveys into a first section that focuses on three general results and a second section in which we discuss some more detailed suggestions from our interviewees.

A. General Results

There were three general results that stood out from our interviews. First, almost everyone stressed that in five years they would like to see more members – especially more families and young people. As one person put it, “Most of the problems that we have can be lessened, if not eliminated, by simply increasing our numbers.” We want to stress that the implication of this finding, with which almost everyone with whom we talked agreed, is that everyone would like to see people of different ages and circumstances, and particularly young families and children.

Second, nearly everyone stressed the centrality and importance of the Sunday services to the well-being of the Church. Many said that they want the services to feed them with Biblical

teachings that will help them to get through their week, to grow in their spirituality, and to reinforce their personal and family's faiths.

Happily, almost everyone we talked to – regardless of the service that they regularly attend or whether they follow the services in person or on-line or on radio – felt that they are getting spiritual nurturing from the services and that they feel that the sermonizing is doing a better job in feeding the congregation than it ever has.

Related to these thoughts on the importance of the services, many people stressed the importance of prayer, of teaching about prayer, praying together, and praying intentionally.

Third, many – but a smaller number than for the previous two points – suggested that they would like a greater emphasis on local mission work⁷ and that it be hands-on, collaborative work with others from the church. However, in light of the large number of older congregants, whose abilities to get out to work are limited, they pointed out that we may need to have more people donating money rather than their time and talents.

B. Specific Results

In this section we will give a flavor for some of the more specific comments and suggestions made by our interviewees. We have tried to group these comments by subject matter, rather than by those making them.⁸ These comments track the three general results we identified in the previous section but also include a “miscellaneous” category of comments. These comments are not cherry-picked; rather, they include almost everything we were told. We will let the words speak almost entirely for themselves.

1. Membership

“We need more young families. There is strength in numbers, and we don't have that strength. Perhaps we can unite [our youth programs] with the Methodists, Episcopalians, and Holy Cross.”

“Could we perhaps combine with the Methodist day care in order to get back what we lost when Mother's Morning Out closed?”⁹

“We could have an Advent walk or a progressive Christmas dinner with the churches in our area.”

Someone then added, “Maybe we could use the progressive dinner with other churches as a way of raising money for local missions.”

In order to learn how to attract young families, “we need to study where those young families go [to church] and then find out why they go there and what those congregations did to attract young families.” This person suggested that we look at the Methodist Church on Prospect near the Art Mart. They are said to have a vigorous youth program. How do they do it?

“We clearly need to broaden our congregation, if for no other reason than that we need in the future to [replace the older congregants who will have passed]. Roughly 6 percent of our annual pledges come from people who joined the Church in the last 10 years. About 60 percent of the first \$1m in annual pledges come from those who are older than 76 years of age.”

⁷ We are not sure whether those making this suggestion knew the amount of local mission work that the Church is doing or what percentage of our mission budget goes to local versus regional, national, and international projects.

⁸ And we have also anonymized the commenters.

⁹ Many people lamented the end of MMO. Several said variations on this feeling: “Eliminating Mother's Morning Out was a huge mistake. It was the easiest way of getting young families into the Church.”

“We need to reinvigorate ourselves. If growing through new members is difficult, then we need to form alliances with other churches, such as Copper Creek, C-U Church, or the other downtown churches. We used to occupy a distinct University niche. Why has that not continued?”

One of the difficulties we face in growing our membership and attracting new congregants is that “people’s lives no longer center on their church. Moreover, what people want out of church has changed.”

Several people mentioned that the music in our Church is marvelous and that we should use that music to attract new members. For example, they suggested “making Music Sunday open and available to the public.”

“We need to have better follow-up when we have visitors to our church. Someone should get in touch with the visitors.” This person said that a prior church that he attended did this and that the people who were contacted after a visit were always grateful. They typically said, “You took us seriously.”

“Young people attract other young people.”

One interviewee mentioned that we might find a means of encouraging University students to come if we had a formal “surrogate family” program, like the one their son had when he was far from home in college. Another respondent suggested sending word of our “surrogate family” program to Presbyterian churches in the Chicagoland area and to the offices of the various synods in Illinois. This respondent also recommended that our Presbyterian Women prepare a cake or cookie or goody package for any students away from home on their birthday and invite them to our church.

One interviewee strongly suggested that we focus on University and professional people in town by getting all new appointments from the University of Illinois Board of Trustees minutes and sending those people a welcome package. We might, he added, send the same package to new lawyers, accountants, and business owners.

“Our strength is that we are a philosophical and intellectual church in a university community.”

2. *Worship Services*

With regard to the worship service, one respondent called for “Good solid preaching with strong Biblical teachings at every worship service. Emphasis on the Presbyterian Principles of Worship consisting of Adoration, Confession, Preaching the Word, Fellowship, and Missional Impact to Community and World.” This same person called for expanding Adult Christian Education. Currently, he said that about 10 percent of Sunday worshippers attend presentations sponsored by Adult Christian Education. He urges us to shoot for 25 percent participation within five years (noting that only the “Faith in the Real World” series currently gets 25 percent participation). Finally, this person urges the Church to consider significantly upgrading the contemporary service and setting an attendance goal to be reached. He felt that the average attendance of about 25 was currently too small to command continuation of that service without a significant upgrade.

Another thoughtful commentator hit both the membership and worship service categories by urging that “Worship will draw an intergenerational multicultural group that fills the sanctuary [so that] two hundred regularly attend by 2025.”

“How can we better nurture people?”

“We need to make better use of small groups. [Our son] finds his small group in another church to be very important to him. Those small groups seem to be a reproduction of the small town habit of caring for one another.”¹⁰

“People want to be fed. They want lessons to guide them to be better Christians throughout the week.”

“Could Matt and Scott [Keeble] trade pulpit visits between First Pres and Copper Creek?”

Several people said that they and other older members of the congregation “have trouble hearing and understanding Eric when he prays, and sometimes during his sermon.” Everyone who made this remark said that this problem troubled them because they invariably find the substance of Eric’s prayers and sermons to be marvelous.

“Our ministers are excellent. They give nurturing lessons every Sunday.”

“If anyone can grow the church, Matt can. Location and our buildings are impediments to our attracting new members. Can we combine with other Presbyterian churches in Champaign?”

Several people stressed the need to “grow the Gathering.” Several also suggested having a blended service (one combining traditional and contemporary styles) at 9am periodically – say, once a month. “Most of the people who wanted a contemporary service gone to Copper Creek.”

One careful student of the Church said that the Church “needs to meet each member wherever he or she is in their spiritual walk.” This, she noted, is tremendously difficult because the worship services have to appeal to many people who are at very different points in their spiritual journeys.

3. *Mission*

“We need to be more involved in mission. We should focus on local mission for our immediate community in downtown Champaign.”

One of our interviewees, a former Session member, identified mission as one of the three most pressing issues facing the Church.¹¹

Some suggested that they would like our Church “to be known in the community as the place that does community mission.”

Many people voiced the belief that we support too many missions. “We need to focus.” Many noted that our ESL program is a local mission.

Our local mission opportunities “do not need to involve swinging a hammer.” People could serve as room parents or organize a Saturday clean-up of the grounds of a local school. Someone described this to us as a “ministry of presence.”

“Daycare for people in the community who can’t afford daycare. This would be a wonderful local mission activity.”

4. *Miscellaneous*

“Prayer groups are authentic and meet frequently. [These groups] should be at the top of the [vision] list.”

“We need to bring our facilities to ADA standards (both buildings), [including] elevator access to the Sanctuary and Centennial Hall.”

“What’s happened to Forward 150? Is there any money left? Is there any will to have a major capital campaign?”

¹⁰ Interestingly, those who made this important comment said that though they like the idea and know that their son values it very highly, they would *not* join a small group.

¹¹ The other two problems this person identified as crucial are worship and children’s programs.

“To foster church growth, we need much better communication outside the church into the community. Our website needs constant updating, and it isn’t getting it. Many young people, particularly at the University, choose churches to visit on the basis of what they see on that church’s website. They also use social media, in which we have a sparse presence. Are we looking for a communications director?”

“Our website is a mess. It needs to pop. We need a professional to tend our website.”

Some commentators suggested that “the Church is overextended. We have too many activities for the active congregants to sustain. We need to cut back, to choose a few things and focus on them.” Others said that “we put on programs and activities as if we were a 750-1000-person church. But we aren’t. We’re only 300 or fewer. The same people show up at the programs and dinners.”

We ought to plan for the transition of some of our office staff, who may be moving on in the next five years.

With regard to Session, “we should ask people for a three-year commitment, which would usually turn into six years. And then we should stagger terms so that one-third of the Session changes every three years.”

“Some churches take the talents of the congregation and use them. We take the talents of our congregation and form committees.”

“We need more transparency in the Church’s communication. What happened to the money from the sale of the land to Copper Creek? Did it accrue to our Church or to PCUSA? What’s our financial situation? What are the prospects for the future?”

“We do not have a good system for giving feedback to the ministers, and we should.”

As an example, some people cited the process by which the 8am service was discontinued. They say that they regularly attended that service but were not consulted about the decision to discontinue the service. They felt that the Worship Committee should have consulted the regular attendees or surveyed them. Nor did these people feel that the basis for the decision to discontinue the 8am service was faithfully explained to them or the rest of the Church.

“We should stream interviews with congregants, our ministers, and visitors on our website.”

“We need much better internal communication in the Church.” “And we need better ways of communicating to others how great our Church is.”

“We need alternative revenue sources and should think ‘outside the box’ for those.”

Under facilities and services, several people pointed to the rebuilding of the kitchen as important in that we can now comfortably and without shame invite others in for meals.

Several people argued for greatly improving the monthly newsletter. It is not, they believe, serving as an effective internal communication tool.

One person very wisely pointed out that “we can’t remain the best kept secret in town. We have to communicate what we are and do much better than we are currently doing.” This person also pointed out that we need a communications director. “Currently, we are in silos. Go see this person for the web, that person for press releases, some other person for help with social media, and yet another for community ads. We need an overall strategy, rather than independent organizations.” This person also strongly suggested our enhancing our community presence by making the Courageous Conversations program part of a coalition effort among churches and other community organizations and also asking to join the Community Coalition. All one has to do to be asked to join is to go to the CC’s Facebook page.

We can publicize ourselves by wearing a First Pres t-shirt when we’re out and about on a Spring, Summer, or Fall day. We might hand out FPCC magnets for refrigerators.

We could do blogs or a podcast. Someone suggested that we look for the work of Nadia Bolz-Weber or the “theology on tap” podcasts of a Catholic priest in a bar talking to people about a theological topic.

“How about a meal for college students one night a week or a month? Or a community dinner once a quarter?” The United Church of Christ has such a meal night for college students every Monday during the University semester; the Christian Place Church has such a meal on Wednesdays.

4. Conclusion

We have thoroughly enjoyed undertaking this project. We’ve come to know some people we had never known in our Church and gotten to tap the thoughts of many whom we did know.

We found three areas of widespread consensus for the Church’s vision for the next five years:

1. Growing the Church with new members, especially members who represent a diversity of age, circumstance, experience, and faith.
2. Continuing the Church’s focus on Biblical worship services that feed the congregants, wherever they are in the faith journey so that we all grow in our faith and become better disciples of Jesus Christ. And
3. Focusing our attention on local mission.

We are deeply impressed by the broad range of ideas that our interviewees suggested for the implementation of these three elements of our five-year vision.