

Mission Study Report 2014



Swarthmore Presbyterian Church

Striving to be the Body of Christ, Here and Now, Ready to Serve!

*"We know that all things
work together for good
for those who love God,
who are called according
to his purpose."*

Romans 8:28-34

Presented to Session November 4, 2014

*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens,
but you are citizens with the saints
and also members of the household of God,
built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ
Jesus himself as the cornerstone.*

*In him the whole structure is joined together
and grows into a holy temple in the Lord;
in whom you also are built together spiritually
into a dwelling-place for God.*

Ephesians 2:19-22

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"In life and in death we belong to God. Through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, we trust in the one triune God, the Holy One of Israel, whom alone we worship and serve."

From "A Brief Statement of Faith"

Introduction

Times of transition between installed pastors provide a rich opportunity to assess where a church has been, where it is presently, and where it believes God is leading it to grow. The congregation and leadership of Swarthmore Presbyterian Church (SPC) have this year had just such an opportunity, taking substantial steps to discern what God intends for the future of our ministry.

In October 2013, our beloved Pastor, Rev. Richard R. Wohlschlaeger, retired after 20 years of faithful service to God and the SPC spiritual community. SPC is fortunate over its history to have experienced a high degree of stability in its leadership, having had two senior pastors since 1975 and only nine since the founding of the Church in 1895. For this reason we were particularly eager to engage in a thoughtful process of discernment to ensure we continue this tradition of stability — by understanding who we are, who we are meant to be, and what kind of leader would be best suited to help this particular church navigate that journey.

By the establishment of a Mission Study Committee, completion of the US Congregational Life Survey, and many recent small group meetings among members of the congregation, the Church has begun to develop a vision of its future. The work of the Mission Study Committee, and this report, are components of the process of putting SPC's vision into concrete form.

THE MISSION STUDY PROCESS

The Mission Study Committee was established by the SPC Session in March 2014. Our church is not new to this kind of work, having completed strategic planning studies in 1999 and 2007 and commissioned a task force as recently as 2010 to assess progress on the 2007 plan. While our current undertaking is more concerned with discerning who we are and who God is calling us to be than on planning and problem-solving, our membership values this kind of work and understands its importance to staying faithful to God and to the communities we serve.

The Mission Study Committee is led by two members of Session, and includes eight additional members of the congregation plus four extended team members who have assisted with small group meetings. The Committee represents a cross-section of the congregation in terms of relative age, gender, family circumstances, and past and current service. The Committee began to meet in April and has held numerous meetings since that time.

On May 18, following worship, the SPC congregation completed the interdenominational US Congregational Life Survey. The survey was taken by 218 members, or approximately 30 percent of the active membership (there were 245 respondents in total, including guests and visitors), across all three Sunday worship services. The survey was conducted by the Committee and its results were analyzed and are embedded in the substance of this report.

Next, the Committee designed, organized, and facilitated a series of 34 small group input sessions that were held over a period of 10 weeks in July through September. These 90-minute sessions were designed to provide an opportunity for the congregation to reflect on fundamental questions regarding our church and its mission. Each small group participated in two separate sessions, the first focused on “understanding where we are now” and the second focused on “discovering what God is calling us to be.” More than 180 members of the congregation participated in at least one session of the small discussion groups, with most of those participating in both.

Following completion of the small group meetings, the Committee analyzed and synthesized the data and perspectives from both the meetings and the US Congregational Life Survey. We also gathered data and vital statistics on the current make-up of the congregation (membership, programs, giving, etc.) to round out the picture. These sources informed the Committee’s findings and suggestions contained in this report, which was presented to Session on Tuesday, November 4, and approved on the same date.

ORGANIZATION OF THIS REPORT

In this report we first provide a brief historical overview of Swarthmore Presbyterian Church. We then present information on the current size and scope of the Church and its activities. The next and most important section is devoted to perspectives on our mission — who we are and who we are called to be, where we are fulfilling our mission and purpose, and where we have room to grow. Last, we include a brief discussion of characteristics and skills we believe we should be looking for in our next pastoral leader.

*Called as partners in Christ's service, called to ministries of grace,
We respond with deep commitment, fresh new lines of faith to trace.
May we learn the art of sharing, side by side and friend with friend,
Equal partners in our caring to fulfill God's chosen end.*

***“Called As Partners in Christ’s Service”
Jane Parker Huber***

SPC's Long & Rich Tradition

Swarthmore Presbyterian Church was founded in December of 1895, three years after the founding of the Borough of Swarthmore. The Church is nestled next to Swarthmore College, which holds a reputation as one of the best liberal arts colleges in North America. The town center and train station are a short walk from our sanctuary. The Borough is part of an award-winning public school district and is ideally situated in an area convenient to interstate highways, the airport, and public transportation – and yet it has retained its small-town residential character and strong sense of community.

Since our first service of worship was held at a local inn, the members of SPC have strived to discern and act upon God's will for its ministry to the Swarthmore area and to the world beyond. Much has changed in the 120 years since that first service. A sanctuary was built and dedicated in 1896. Designed by renowned Arts & Crafts architect William Lightfoot Price and his brother Walter, it was modeled after a chapel in Brittany with a corner bell tower, seating for 243 people, and the interior finished with Flemish oak. The Church's rapid growth necessitated construction of the Loeffler Chapel in 1902-03 and the enlargement of the sanctuary in 1920-22. A narthex was added in 1973 and the chancel was enlarged and a new pipe organ installed in 2011-12.

Since 1895, nine pastors have accepted a call to provide ordained leadership for a congregation blessed with a tradition of strong lay participation by women and men who have given their time and financial support to the many committees, worship, education, and outreach activities of the Church. The congregation has remained faithful to its Presbyterian roots while remaining open to God's call for service in a world radically different from the world of 1895. The ministries of the SPC congregation have been shaped by Scripture and thoughtful discernment of God's will, together with an eagerness to play our part to help establish God's Kingdom in our time, in our world.

The Church's ministry has always been focused on providing for the spiritual and material needs of the Swarthmore area, in addition to the neighboring cities of Chester and Philadelphia; at the same time, virtually since its inception our church's outreach has extended well beyond those communities. The first of many outreach concerns ahead of their time occurred in 1899 when the cause of the College for Colored Girls in Anniston, Alabama was presented to the congregation. The Boys Brigade, a forerunner of the Boy Scouts, and a chapter of the King's Messengers, a group for young women and girls to study home and foreign missions, were already active at SPC. Outreach programs have since expanded to include communities in the southern United States, Appalachia, Central America, and the support of mission co-workers globally in areas such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Middle East, Nicaragua, and the Philippines.

SPC's history of commitment to civil rights and social justice was tested in the decade of the 1960s when the congregation became divided over the pastor's activism related to the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam. Healing of the division began when Rev. Bertram Atwood began his ministry at SPC. Rev. Atwood (1969-75) and his successors, Revs. J. Barrie Shepherd (1976-91) and Richard Wohlschlaeger (1993-2013), restored the unity of the congregation through ministries characterized by spiritually grounded, thoughtful engagement with potentially divisive issues without alienating the membership.

Rev. Shepherd is a gifted poet who interpreted the tumultuous 1960s and '70s in powerful sermons and whose 16-year legacy included the birth of a Peacemaking Committee and the establishment of a covenant partnership with the local Jewish and Roman Catholic communities. Under Barrie's leadership, fiscal affairs were strengthened by the formation of Long Range Financial Planning Force and the institution of an annual Fall Fair that has remained a great source of community-building and fellowship as well as a reliable fundraiser. In the early 1980s, the confluence of longer life expectancies, more fractured families, and a growing membership led to our first call for a Parish Associate to focus on visitation and to moderate the Board of Deacons.

Rev. Wohlschlaeger led our church's move from a bicameral to a unicameral form of government. In Dick's time, our tradition of serving the needs of members and neighbors meant the development of a Stephen Ministry, the establishment of a World Mission Task Force, an Alternative Christmas Shop that generates over \$25,000 annually of mission support, and a partnership with Family Promise, wherein homeless families are offered food and shelter in our church school classrooms. Dick taught both members and staff to work collaboratively and with sensitivity and transparency, among other things helping SPC to navigate rapid changes in technology.

SPC TODAY

Today, SPC has over 700 members, comprised of close to 400 household units. Although we have not been immune to the declines in membership that have plagued other mainline Protestant churches over the past two decades, during the past four to five years our membership has begun to stabilize. About one-third of our membership attends worship on any given Sunday.

Of note, the average age of our congregation is 64. Over 40 percent of membership is age 65 or older and 55-60 percent is over age 55. Forty percent is retired. SPC recognizes the "graying" of our congregation and has made efforts over the past several years to attract young families to our church, including the establishment of a Church Family Worship, which has been a resounding success.

According to the US Congregational Life Survey, 90 percent of our members hold a Bachelor's degree and fully 57 percent hold a graduate degree. Swarthmore is a college town and a community that places a particularly high value on learning and education. Also reflecting the larger community, the vast majority of our membership is white and comes from traditional households with an above-average presence of married, two-parent families.

Approximately 40 percent of our members come from a Presbyterian background. Others come from a large variety of faith traditions, a trend which, anecdotally, we see as on the rise. SPC takes particular pride in being a community that will “meet you where you are” in your own personal faith journey.

SPC’s physical plant is extensive and includes the recently renovated sanctuary, fellowship hall (1984) with full, separate kitchen, 1902 chapel (which now hosts our Church Family Worship service), staff office building, and classrooms on three floors, some of which serve the weekday Nursery Day School which regularly cares for over 50 preschoolers and 20 morning and afternoon kindergartners. In 1988, on adjacent grounds, SPC completed a memorial garden and in 2002 installed a labyrinth. Both building and grounds at SPC are in extremely good condition; we have several volunteer groups that donate significant time and effort to their upkeep. SPC also manages the ABC (A Better Chance) House next door to the Church. In fact, the house is SPC’s former manse. ABC Strath Haven is a charity that offers room and board to underprivileged youth in the school district so that they may attend our award-winning high school.

SPC has been since 1981 staffed with three pastors who are responsible for overseeing vital parts of our mission. In addition to planning and leading worship most Sundays, our Interim Pastor’s key roles are the leadership of Session, including guidance and support for the interim process, and staff development. Our Associate Pastor, Christian Education & Youth Ministry, is responsible for leading the high school and middle school youth programs, teaching the confirmation class, and supporting our children’s and adult education programs. Our Associate Pastor, Congregational Care & Older Adult Ministry, works as staff liaison to the Board of Deacons, supports our Stephen Ministry program as a member of the Stephen Leader team, and is responsible for a ministry of visitation in the nine retirement communities where more than 100 of our members reside. SPC employs three additional full-time staff plus another 12 part-time staff who are compensated on an hourly or annual stipend basis.

The SPC congregation has always been an extraordinarily active one. This disposition is best reflected in our mission statement, “Striving to be the body of Christ – here and now – ready to serve.” According to the Congregational Life Survey, 61 percent of our members are involved in one or more leadership roles in the congregation. We support seven key ministries – Buildings & Grounds, Church Giving & Finance, Membership, Worship & Music, Christian Education, Congregational Life, and Outreach – with a total of 30 different committees and task forces. We support 21 elected and ordained Deacons who engage in a variety of caring and compassionate ministries, serving those in need both within our community of faith and beyond. The Stephen Ministry program at SPC is a dedicated group of laypeople who nurture and use their gifts to provide care to congregation members and others in the community who may be struggling through a difficult time in life. Our Session is comprised of 24 Elders who serve three-year terms and are responsible for leading 10 Session committees.

SPC members are generous not only with their time and talents but also with their financial resources. Over the past 10 years, the average financial pledge per SPC family has increased by one-third. Like many other congregations, we do struggle to increase the number of families who make a pledge to our church. However, we have also been fortunate to have members contribute to a substantial permanent endowment fund to help fund building repairs and operating expenses. The total endowment is approximately \$4.0 million, which is invested and distributed in a manner to generate perpetual income. This generosity has allowed SPC to continue to support its ministry at a high level despite declining membership – although it is reasonable to question how much longer this trend can continue.

*Christ's example, Christ's inspiring,
Christ's clear call to work and worth,
Let us follow, never faltering, reconciling folk on earth.
Men and women, richer, poorer, all God's people, young and old,
Blending human skills together, gracious gifts from God unfold.*

"Called As Partners in Christ's Service"
Jane Parker Huber

Swarthmore Presbyterian Church:

Our Mission

From all that the Mission Study Committee has considered, we believe we have discerned five key themes that define the core mission and values of SPC. These themes help to answer the central questions *who is SPC* and *who is God calling us to be*. They also help to identify action steps to consider as the future unfolds. Broadly categorized, these themes are: Worship, Outreach, Caring Community, Spirit of Inquiry, and Youth. We address each of these in turn below – even though they clearly overlap in many ways.

WORSHIP

Worship is essential to SPC's values and to our spiritual well-being. It is the central experience that brings us closer to God and to one another. Our pastoral staff has always paid particular attention to the careful selection and coordination of music, readings, sermon, and prayer and as a result the worship experience feels like an integrated whole. Worship excellence is the hallmark of our identity, and, as such, a core value that is critical to our congregation's future.

SPC is privileged to have had a long history of preaching that has served to motivate, inspire, and deepen our faith. When the Mission Study Committee asked the congregation what brought them to our church, as well as what keeps them here, the quality of the sermons was a persistent theme. We are an educated community and like to be intellectually challenged; at the same time, we are an active community and want to understand how to apply God's Word to make sense of the world around us and respond in a Christian way to the tough issues and choices we face on a daily basis.

Our church is also privileged to have had a long history of excellence in music and for many in the congregation it is a central way that we deepen our spirituality and pass on our beliefs to the next generation. As one small group member put it, "We make a joyful noise. Music is an expression of our spirituality and our togetherness." SPC is known throughout the community for its music program and it has become a special way in which we take our ministry out beyond our four walls. Special musical offerings usually include major choral works during Advent and Lent, and a Cantata led by our children's and youth choirs normally presented on Christian Family Sunday in May.

We offer many opportunities for worship at SPC, delivered in a variety of styles and in a setting of great architectural and aesthetic distinction. Sundays begin with a reflective and personal Early Worship service held in the small transept of the Sanctuary, an intimate space tucked between stained glass windows and piano. Later in the morning the full Sanctuary is home to a traditional service that engages worshippers in a formal liturgical style with traditional hymns, classical music, and chorales. In 2012, in an effort to provide worship options that might be more amenable to young families with children, SPC introduced Church Family Worship, a shorter, more contemporary, and interactive service that has been drawing 60-70 participants a week. SPC also holds many special worship services conducted chiefly around the Lenten and Advent seasons.

It is not by accident that SPC is in the enviable position of offering such a wealth of opportunities for contemplative and joyful worship. Each of our services has taken shape from years of Presbyterian tradition at work in our community, extraordinary leadership from our pastoral staff, and responsiveness to the expressed needs of our members. Our thoughtful, vocal congregation has asked for (and received) a weekly and yearly worship schedule that is wonderful in its richness but also demanding of our staff and not without tradeoffs in serving our congregation – see the discussion of our Sunday morning schedule in the Youth section below as one example. The continuous attention to the quality and content of worship services in SPC, then, will be squarely on the agenda of our lay and pastoral leadership in the years ahead.

OUTREACH

One of the strongest themes that emerged from the Mission Study process is the importance to SPC members of expressing their faith through service to others. Our US Congregational Survey results show that we are a particularly active congregation when it comes to involvement in church programs, church leadership, and external community and outreach activities. In this respect our vision statement, “Striving to be the body of Christ – here and now – ready to serve” is revealing. It emphasizes the tangible (body), the immediate (here and now), and expressing our faith through service to others (ready to serve).

SPC is especially proud of its commitment to outreach and the impact that we make through our contributions of time, talents, and financial resources. Locally, in 2013, we supported seven area (Chester and Philadelphia) mission partners with time and treasure and facilitated 10 volunteer programs that involved congregational participation. Through our involvement in the Interfaith Hospitality Network, temporarily homeless families with children or children on the way were offered a total of four weeks of shelter, food, and companionship, as an alternative to the shelter system. Our support of the A Better Chance Program (ABC) provides a nurturing environment for young men and women from underserved communities who leave their homes to attend Strath Haven High School. Globally, SPC provided financial support for projects that help fight hunger and the causes of hunger at home and around the world. Through Directed Mission Giving, our 2013 budget supported mission co-workers in Nicaragua, the Middle East, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Philippines.

Of course, there are never enough funds to support all we believe we should. Each year, SPC's overhead costs (staff and property) rise at a rate much higher than our modest increases in budget. As a result, we struggle to increase our commitments to outreach – our third major category of expenditure. The challenge the congregation faces going forward, then, is to find ways to “increase the size of the pie,” and many members during our small group discussions offered ideas to increase the reach and impact of our outreach efforts through more creative collaborations with other churches and local institutions. Others made suggestions for increasing our impact through greater focus, participation in sustained project work, use of annual “themes” selected strategically, etc. As the needs of our constituencies multiply, and dollars become ever scarcer, these will be important ideas for the SPC congregation and its leadership to develop.

It is a point of pride at SPC that we are a hands-on congregation that glorifies God through giving and service, but a countervailing theme also emerged in our small group discussions. More than one member noted that while SPC is very good at creating and implementing programs, and thereby doing many good works, we may also have room to develop a richer understanding of our personal and communal spirituality. In other words, some members seem to be saying that we do a better job of focusing on the “outside” (programs) than we do of focusing on the “inside” (spirituality) – the well-spring that should support all that we do. This was by no means a unanimous theme of the small groups, but the Committee raises it because the observation is borne out by the US Congregational Survey, in which SPC scored itself extremely low compared with other congregations in terms of spiritual growth, spiritual practices, and spiritual connections. In many ways SPC is a congregation that, in the words of one member, is “hesitant to be overtly faithful” and therefore expresses its faith primarily through vehicles such as service, music, and fellowship. We believe our church has room to better connect “inside” and “outside” – to enhance spiritual growth through education, dialogue, and practice of spiritual disciplines – making our external outreach efforts even more powerful for others, more deeply felt by ourselves, and more connected to God's purpose.

CARING COMMUNITY

Closely related to outreach is the concept of “caring community.” SPC members are passionate about making a difference in the world around them but are equally concerned with ministering to one another. As one small group participant said, “We take care of each other. As a community of faith, we do right by one another.”

SPC has a cohesive sense of community for a congregation of 750 members leading very busy lives. This was a pervasive theme when the small groups discussed what brought them to SPC and what keeps them here. Closely related is the theme of congregational involvement, or, as one member put it, “we have big arms and lots of energy.” Our congregation values fellowship in its purest definition: enjoying spiritual acts together.

Many members described their involvement in the caring ministries of our Church – either as caregivers or as receivers of care – as among the most profound in deepening their relationship with God. SPC supports 21 elected and ordained Deacons who are called to do the work of the Church by providing sympathy, witness, and service – actions that were modeled by Jesus Christ. We also support 10 Stephen Ministers who engage in a variety of caring and compassionate ministries both inside and outside the congregation. These ministries will only gain in value and importance given our current demographics and the continued ageing of the congregation.

Underlying this concept of mutual ministry to one another is a set of attitudes that is strongly shared and deeply felt across the SPC congregation. SPC members are described as warm, welcoming, and caring. They are open and inclusive, welcoming people from all faith traditions and respectful that others are on different stages of their own personal faith journeys. SPC members do not just tolerate diversity but welcome it in all its forms, believing that Christ taught acceptance, forgiveness, and love for all human kind, and that God’s house is one of many rooms and should be a safe haven for the marginalized.

SPIRIT OF INQUIRY

Reflecting the attitudes described above, members feel strongly that SPC is, and must continue to be, a church that meets people where they are in their individual faith journeys.

Although many SPC members come from traditional faith backgrounds, a large percentage does not. These members told us that they chose to join SPC because we were especially “open, warm, and welcoming,” a place that “gave me the opportunity to become a Christian,” a place where “I could follow my own individual faith journey, at my own pace.” We are not an openly evangelistic congregation, but with the leadership of our pastors we seem to have created an environment conducive to “bringing the lost to Christ.”

The twin notions of “the journey” and “at my own pace” came up so frequently during our small group sessions that they could almost be said to be ingrained in our DNA. Members appreciate that SPC is a place where they can ask questions, share personal perspectives, and challenge assumptions without fear of judgment coming from their leaders or their fellow congregants – hence the theme “spirit of inquiry.” “Acceptance is the behavior modeled by the pastoral staff,” said one member. “We are loving, caring, and accepting of each other.”

Broadly speaking, SPC members describe their theology as progressive. They are keen to apply Biblical precepts and the teachings of Christ in the here-and-now, to do their part to establish God’s Kingdom in our time, in our world. They describe SPC as a place where they can live out their commitment to service, social justice, and moral responsibility, while working out their personal faith and deepening their understanding of God.

The small groups professed no wish for SPC to become “overly dogmatic,” but many did recognize the need to be “better teachers of our own Presbyterian faith tradition.” They wished more members were inspired to attend what all agreed are the rich and well-selected adult education programs on offer from our church. Some members who came recently from other churches or faith traditions observed a relative paucity of Bible study or other small group offerings at SPC. Given the previous discussion about our church’s room to grow spiritually, additional attention should be given to how we can build on the congregation’s pronounced spirit of inquiry and inspire their deepened spiritual understanding through education.

YOUTH

SPC devotes a great deal of time and energy to the needs of our youth. According to the results of the US Congregational Survey, one of SPC’s most important values relative to other congregations is in “caring for young people,” where we are in the 79th percentile nationally. Thirty-five percent of respondents reported that ministry for children and youth is one of the three most valued aspects of our congregation – as compared with 16 percent for Presbyterian churches nationally and 20 percent for all other congregations. Our small group sessions bore out these data. What was most striking about the small groups was how strongly our older parishioners feel about this value and the need not just to preserve but even to redouble our commitment to it.

SPC offers an enviable program for our middle and high school age children, led with great passion and charisma by our Associate Pastor, Christian Education & Youth Ministry. This program includes regular Sunday afternoon Scripture-based programming, a winter ski trip, week-long summer mission trips and youth conferences, and a robust confirmation curriculum with dedicated adult advisors. All of these programs, and more, are extremely well-attended by the youth of SPC who are also welcome to bring their friends (and they do). Once a year our middle and high schoolers prepare and deliver an entire Youth Sunday worship service. Nine youth currently serve as full-fledged members of Session committees and three serve as full-time Deacons.

Regrettably, SPC still has room to grow into this value with our younger children – principally children four years old through fifth grade. During the past five to seven years, attendance at our Sunday Church School has declined significantly. Participants in our small groups were concerned about this trend; as recently as 10 years ago SPC had a vibrant and well-attended Church School program. As this report is being written, we are implementing a new Sunday morning schedule, which was developed at least in part to make it “easier” for children to attend Church School. Although it is still in the early stages, it appears that this change is making a positive impact, if not a major one. Participants in the small groups did not have many solutions to offer for this issue but they are eager to ensure that we fulfill the vows that we as a congregation make to the children of our church during the sacrament of baptism.

A second concern related to the value of “youth” is what appears to be an unintended consequence of implementing the Church Family Worship: many members are feeling that the congregation has become fragmented. Older members value the presence of our youth in the traditional service whether they are acting as acolytes, crucifers, ushers, choir members, or worship leaders, or are just present in the pews. An especially tender moment in our traditional worship is “A Time with Children,” when one of the pastors delivers a homily to the children of the congregation, who assemble at the chancel steps; today, most children are participating in the Church Family Worship.

This perceived generational divide was a concern expressed strongly by older members, who value the intergenerational nature of our congregation and also value a cohesive sense of community in our church. We did not have sufficient feedback from young families in the small groups to gauge their perspective on this topic one way or another. Therefore, the Committee does not recommend throwing out the baby with the bathwater and making substantive changes to the worship schedule without further research. But, it is an issue that will most certainly need to be addressed going forward.

*So God grant us for tomorrow ways to order human life
That surround each person's sorrow with a calm that conquers strife.
Make us partners in our living, our compassion to increase,
Messengers of faith, thus giving hope and confidence and peace.*

***“Called As Partners in Christ’s Service”
Jane Parker Huber***

Additional Issues for SPC in Responding to God's Call

Some of the specific challenges inherent in the five key themes that are at the center of SPC's mission and vision are mentioned in each section above. There are two additional issues that are more general in nature and affect our ability to achieve positive results on all of those themes.

GROWING MEMBERSHIP

Understanding the needs of families with young children, energizing their involvement in SPC, and helping them to raise healthy and faithful families in the local community is a major challenge for the leadership of SPC in the years ahead. As stated previously, nearly three out of every five SPC members are over age 55, and two of every five are over 65. One hundred members – 13 percent of the congregation – live in retirement homes. Participants in the small group sessions were not aware of these specific numbers, but they were well aware of the graying of our congregation and the many challenges inherent in continuing to replenish our membership in the coming years.

SPC's Membership Committee has taken strong and active steps over the past three to five years to grow our church's membership, and, as stated previously, these efforts have achieved some results in stabilizing the numbers. These efforts have included systematic outreach to new families in the community, establishing a semiannual Open House for inquirers to get to know SPC in a low-key way, launching the Church Family Worship service, and taking our music and youth ministries out to the broader community in a more active way. It is clear that members of all ages and generations solidly support the family-centered focus of much of our programming. But despite these recent efforts, it has become equally clear that few of us have a real understanding of how best to identify and meet the needs of the demographic from, say, 20 to 35.

Many members also thought that we could be doing more to cast a broader geographic and demographic net by better informing local communities of the opportunities for service, worship, and fellowship that are available at SPC. Repeatedly in small group sessions, we heard members speak with great pride of what we offer and what we accomplish, but express concern that our offerings are not more broadly understood beyond our own membership. This implies organizing ourselves to the task of external communications in the near future. We are not a congregation that craves attention or recognition for good works, but we are increasingly mindful that stronger communications "beyond our four walls" means more opportunity to build membership and outreach, and to make SPC an even more diverse and inclusive church family.

These related challenges of building membership generally, appealing to younger cohorts specifically, and doing a better job at communicating our strengths to a broader audience should be very important objectives for new clerical and lay leadership.

ORGANIZATION

Despite this congregation's immense and longstanding commitment to our church's programs both internally and externally, many expressed the concern that they are feeling "tapped out." The Nominating Committee is having an increasingly difficult time staffing the various committees and task forces. Membership numbers are stagnant yet the number of volunteer opportunities continues to increase; SPC's annual report is thicker every year with reports from the leaders of all our many and various activities.

Financially speaking, as membership numbers remain stagnant (at best) we continue to ask members to pledge more to support our annual budget. Members have increased their annual pledges, on average, every year for more than a decade; we just wrapped up a \$1.9 million capital campaign. How long can we continue to inspire members to higher levels of giving?

Within the small group sessions, there was enormous pride in how many ministries SPC is able to support but a growing sense that we may have reached the point where we are trying to do too much. Some believed we should be decreasing the size of committees, others felt we should look at reducing the time commitments for committee participation. Some believed we do not need 24 Elders. Still others thought we should reduce the number of commitments across the board, allowing us to focus on the most important priorities. Some participants thought we should be doing a better job of finding and re-energizing less active members as a way of better distributing our commitments across the congregation (and bringing less active members back into the fold in the bargain).

We noted that those members who are most involved in church governance (especially current and former Session members) felt this issue most keenly. It certainly is one that should be investigated going forward, whether the solution ends up being to make change or to maintain the status quo. If changes are to be made, they must be made incrementally, over time, and with delicacy by new clerical leadership. This is not a congregation that is accepting of sudden or unilateral change.

*Thus new patterns for Christ's mission, in a small or global sense,
Help us bear each other's burdens, breaking down each wall or fence.
Words of comfort, words of vision, words of challenge, said with care,
Bring new power and strength for action, make us colleagues, free and fair.*

"Called As Partners in Christ's Service"
Jane Parker Huber

Characteristics & Skills of Our Next Pastoral Leader

This report, at least in large measure, is an aspirational document that urges us to look ahead to what we can be as a community of faith serving God. But as we make sense of the kind of pastoral leadership that will guide us to that future, it has been impossible for our membership not to give a longing glance to the past. Our recently retired Rev. Wohlschlaeger was almost universally beloved and appreciated, so it has been at times a challenge for us to think past him to envision how another might lead us. When we asked the small groups what qualities we need in a new pastor, “a young Dick Wohlschlaeger” was, often, the reflexive response.

Hearteningly, though, reflections on Rev. Wohlschlaeger’s contributions turned quickly to a frank assessment of what was valuable in his ministry, why, how SPC has changed even in the year since his retirement, and what all of this begs of our future. Not surprisingly, the skills, strengths, and personal traits we seek in a new pastor flow directly from the five key themes that we see as defining our mission and values.

Foremost, we need an exceptionally capable leader of worship, and for our faith community such a leader is embodied in two important ways. First, this congregation thrives with pastors who are able to honor the customs of a reformed faith tradition that spans five centuries and at the same time make Christ’s Word resonate in a contemporary context. This means that our next pastor must be learned, must share our interest in faithfully representing our denomination’s traditions, but also must be deeply committed to reconciling Scripture to modern family life, social progress and discord, and global affairs.

Second, and equally important to us, a capable worship leader is thought provoking and invitational. The “spirit of inquiry” theme discussed above should certainly apply to our next pastoral call: we desire among us a leader who has a vital, deep, and growing personal experience and commitment to God as revealed by Jesus Christ, who invites us to travel with him on a faith journey, or with her on an exploration of how we can make God manifest in our community, nation, and world. This requires an attitude from the pulpit that is more inquisitive and welcoming than dogmatic. It requires a pastor who does not shy from tough theological or popular issues, but does so in a way that doesn’t alienate others’ points of view. Our appreciation of lifelong education and the broad range of faith traditions from which our members come means that our worship leader must share our commitment to spiritual discovery and be able to encourage it in us.

Another important outcome of our small group sessions had to do with the interpersonal skills we expect of a pastoral leader. Because we aspire to be an inclusive faith community rich with tolerance and love, we seek a pastor who embodies (or at least to a considerable degree demonstrates) those same attributes in dealing with us. This point is related to the “invitational” style of worship leadership outlined above, but carried out at a much more intimate level. “Relational” and “emotionally intelligent” are what we seem to be looking for at a personal level, and “community building,” “democratic,” and “facilitative” describe what we need from a pastor as he or she deals with lay leadership in committees and small groups.

The challenges and opportunities we see for ourselves in the years ahead (see the Youth and Outreach sections above for examples) also call for pastoral leadership that is energetic and creative. For us to do more in service to the underprivileged, for example, we need a pastor who desires to serve with us and find new ways in which we might serve; and for us to grow membership, we need a pastor who is keen to work with us to find ways to engage younger singles, couples, and families in fellowship. Such challenges demand a certain vitality and boldness of vision that we are eager to find.

The foregoing paragraphs demonstrate our desire to find a pastor who is ready and willing to join us both at church and as a part of our “caring community” more broadly construed. Because of our desire to feel that we are “all in this together,” as one member put it, it is also hard for us to imagine calling a pastor who would not want to move into one of our neighborhoods, or come to know and befriend us in the fullness of our lives outside SPC.

Pastors with all of these characteristics – intellectually strong, theologically “relevant,” caring and relational, attractive to young families – seem to be especially embraced here at SPC. And as a collective body, we are at a point in our life together where we are hungry for new leadership. With the Grace of God, our new pastor will inspire and empower our congregation to accomplish an even greater ministry than ever before.

*For as in one body we have many members,
and not all the members have the same function,
so we, who are many, are one body in Christ,
and individually we are members one of another.
We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us:
prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering;
the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity;
the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.*

Romans 12:4-8

Conclusion

One of the most significant findings that have come from the Committee's work, especially from the small group discussions, is that our congregation feels intense commitment to SPC – to the broad scope of what we do, to the impact we have on our own lives and the lives of others, and to what we are capable of doing going forward. This Study has confirmed our core programs but also articulated some ways in which we can continue to grow into the mission that we believe God has for us as a church. We seek to define a Christian future for SPC that will help us on our individual journeys of faith while advancing the Gospel. This is a great situation for the right pastor.

The members of the Mission Study Committee are pleased to have been a part of the process. We also wish to thank Rev. Dr. Eric Springsted, who has served as Interim Pastor since December 2013, for his capable support of this process.

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