

NEW BEGINNINGS REPORT TO SESSION

February, 2016

Background

In December of 2014, the First Presbyterian Church at Caldwell ("FPC") began a process called "New Beginnings" with a resolution by Session to participate in the program. This program, which was recommended by the Presbytery to all of its congregations, was an opportunity for FPC to assess its ministries and to make decisions about our future. At its core was a search for answers to the question, "How do we as a congregation evolve and adapt to the changing context of the community in which we live and minister?" While originally designed for churches in decline, this process has also been helpful to congregations that are looking for energy, direction and focus. Perhaps our situation is a hybrid of both of these.

In January, 2015, a representative from the Presbyterian Church USA met with members of the congregation to start the preparation of the New Beginnings Assessment Report ("NBAR"). The NBAR is a narrative about our church based upon that meeting, and a multitude of resources and statistical databases available to the New Beginnings national team. The NBAR was used extensively as the basis for discussion during small group meetings that followed. It is attached to this report for review.

The New Beginnings program was led by eight volunteers from the congregation. These were FPC members who were invited to that role by Dr. Sommers in early 2015, and subsequently participated in a training event in March to prepare for the program. On May 31, 2015, New Beginnings was introduced to the congregation at a "Town Hall" meeting in Fellowship Hall, where the leaders described the next step in the New Beginnings process, the Discernment phase.

Discernment was, and still is, the heart of New Beginnings. The curriculum was established by the creators of the New Beginnings program and consisted of a series of six small-group meetings, or "House Meetings." Each House Meeting group was coordinated by one of the New Beginnings leaders and consisted of approximately ten to twelve people. The promotion and recruitment efforts of the leaders, as well as the generous participation of the congregation at large, enabled the team to field eight groups for the House Meetings. These meetings began on Sunday, September 27, 2015 with all of the groups starting the first meeting together, and then breaking out into the small groups to continue the process. Following this, each group met weekly through early November. At the end of each week, the leaders met to discuss the results of the previous week's meetings.

The House Meetings were well attended. Most people were able to attend all of the sessions with their groups, or by making them up with another group. The participants were committed, energized and eager to see results from our collective effort. It was observed by many that the process itself resulted in the making of new friends and relationships. This was an unexpected and welcome benefit of the program.

Finally, on January 31, 2016, the Leadership Team reviewed a draft of this report with all of the participants of the program who attended. This was done to make sure that everyone had an opportunity to express any final thoughts and ideas from the House Meetings. It also reinforced the fact that this has been a team effort.

Emerging Themes

As was to be expected from a congregation as passionate as ours, discussion in the groups each week was lively, and sometimes even heated. Week after week as the leaders met, what was most remarkable was the high level of agreement we were seeing – agreement about what things we do well, what things we do not do as well, and where we go next. Some recurring themes regarding the areas where there might be some room for change quickly developed:

- **Outreach to the local community.** FPC should present itself to the local community as the role model of a loving, service-oriented church. We should prayerfully explore and respond to the diverse needs within our community, thereby building caring relationships. Perhaps some of the resources that are currently going to help people in distant regions of the world might be used just as effectively right in our own neighborhood. We need to create a much more welcoming atmosphere for those who do decide to visit our church, while also shepherding and reviving relationships within the congregation.
- **Nurturing the congregation.** Fellowship is key. FPC needs to find better ways to involve and excite those who are already a part of our community of faith to participate in the terrific opportunities that are being offered here. Models of how to do this well include the Pittsburgh Project and the Katrina mission trips. New Beginnings participants wondered if there might be ways to replicate the unique level of fellowship that is generated by experiences like that by doing similar good (and much-needed) work near home.
- **Youth.** Our children are the future of the Church, wherever they may grow up and settle. While our Sunday school program is admirable, perhaps there are ways it

could be revitalized. Opportunities for spiritual engagement for our youth have been growing and should be nurtured.

- **Communication.** The success of whatever we choose to do going forward depends on our ability to get the word out. For this to be an inviting and vital place to our community, people need to be aware of the work we are doing. If our congregation members are to be able to effectively apply their abilities and talents to our mission, they need to know what opportunities are available. We must find ways to increase this awareness internally and in the community at large.

In addition to the themes presented, each of the groups contributed ideas and thoughts for our future that are worth noting. They are attached in the appendix to this report.

Conclusions

As we neared the end of the House Meetings, we focused our group discussions on two main points, one quite specific and the other almost endlessly broad.

First: What do we envision as our best choice for a future ministry? Stay as we are, redefine our mission, relocate, restart, parallel start, adoption, or close?

Second: What actions might we take in the short and long term to most effectively fulfill our ministry?

Our participants were nearly unanimous. The conclusions of the New Beginnings process are:

1. That the best strategy for First Presbyterian Church at Caldwell going forward is a hybrid of the choices. We should “stay as we are” to the extent that there are many things we do well to promote discipleship, but we also need to redefine our mission by choosing to be a more discipleship-oriented congregation. We need to redirect our efforts to be more Christ-like in helping those in our immediate community. Staying as we are without redefining our mission will most likely result in closing our doors. Membership is declining as are revenues. In twenty years we could find ourselves in the same position as did the West Caldwell church before its merger with FPC. Mission re-direction is what is needed while still preserving what is best about our church over the years.

2. That what we do as a church should be guided by asking, “Does this promote Christian discipleship and fellowship in our church and community?”

New Beginnings Recommendations

Recommendation 1: The First Presbyterian Church at Caldwell shall enter into conversation with the Presbytery of Newark and the Presbyterian Church, USA about the next steps for us to achieve “mission redefinition.”

Recommendation 2: That Session shall create a “New Beginnings Steering Committee” to ensure that existing committees and staff promote the development and implementation of New Beginnings initiatives.

Recommendation 3: That the New Beginnings Leadership Team prepares a presentation to the congregation reporting on the findings.

Our participants’ suggestions for specific courses of action follow in the Appendix.

Respectfully submitted,

The New Beginnings Leadership Team

Appendix

Mission/Service

There is a strong and common recognition that we want to better engage in service to the local community and build caring relationships. We want to be visible in our neighborhood as witnesses who are in touch with local needs and respond with loving kindness. At the same time there is recognition that we do not truly know the needs of our community, particularly within the context of the increasingly diverse and changing needs of our modern time. We also want to provide some activities that allow others to participate without making a full-time or long-term commitment.

Participant Suggestions

- Convene a Bible study group to identify the unmet needs of the local community and develop a plan to address specific needs. There are stories from other churches' New Beginnings program that could serve as inspiration for our efforts.
- Leverage existing FPC leadership and experience in the area of mission and service to provide care for local needs. Dads With A Mission, Inc. is a successful example of service to community needs. The Pittsburgh Project and Katrina Mission trips are excellent models of FPC service capabilities that aid needs in other areas of our country.
- Partner in service with other local churches, ministerial association and community organizations. Partnering would enable FPC to capitalize on outside skills, expertise and programs as well as to conserve our stretched resources more efficiently. Opportunities are broad and varying, including community based Bible study, soup kitchens, tutoring programs and youth-led coffee houses.
- Intergenerational activities, ex: teens teaching seniors how to do Facebook or Skype
- Partner with the nursery school
- Connect with Maria Burak/food pantry/seniors to address local needs
- Church world service assistance, e.g. Syrian refugees in Jersey City
- Initiate "Caldwell Cares Day"
- Saturday work service responding to needs reported during the week
- Partner with local schools which require community service
- Explore needs of growing Hispanic population
- Support for families/working parents of special needs children
- Support for adults caring for aging parents
- Support for separated/divorced people
- Support for the bereaved
- Support for job loss
- Support for seniors: offer speakers on related topics, nights out, events in Fellowship Hall targeted to seniors, ex. big bands, daytime activities, fellowship, Bible study
- Support groups and speakers related to Alzheimer's and Parkinson's diseases for both the individual experiencing the disease and their caregivers

- Participate in tutoring partnerships e.g. literacy volunteers for growing Hispanic community
- After school programs
- Build an image of offering the building to serve the community in various ways, possibly including the kitchen or space for the community food pantry.
- Expand use of the church van, possibly for families with small children for outings.
- Host a soup kitchen and/or food pantry in our church
- “City Harvest” type activity (collecting left-over food from restaurants)
- Monthly spaghetti dinner for \$5.00, open to the community
- Speakers targeting topics that appeal to both members of the congregation and of the community: college applications/essays, financial aid, estate planning, starting kindergarten
- Job Fair
- Work with local businesses to find ways we can work together to help others, alternative collection sites to help (Towne Laundromat volunteered to be a beta test site this year, owner is the founding member of Vera Amici, a fundraising organization for the community)

Church Life/Nurturing the Congregation

We recognize that the FPC congregation is part of the community we wish to better serve. We want to build on existing strong church-family values to ensure that all family members have an opportunity to be cared for. We also need to improve upon our ability to welcome new congregants into our family.

Suggestions

- Formalize a “shepherding” program to ensure new congregants are integrated into the church community and to reinvigorate relationships with those members who feel “left out”.
- Develop a congregational care community with a database of congregational skills, talents and interests that could be utilized to help the needs of the congregation as they occur, including needs of shut-ins, families with infants, illnesses/surgery recoveries, the loss of a loved one. Develop a system for communicating congregational care needs.
- Identify and address spiritual development needs. While some adult Christian Education opportunities exist that seem to go unattended, we need to find ways that stimulate participation. Perhaps, Bible study groups in homes, or other approaches will appeal to people.
- Host regularly occurring social events to foster and strengthen fellowship both within the congregation as well as to welcome the community to church events.
- Make Coffee Hour a more friendly environment for visitors
- Provide greeters at Coffee Hour, approach people standing alone or new people to our church
- Develop a welcoming committee for after-church/Coffee Hour interactions with new and potentially new congregants
- The visitor’s information desk at rear of sanctuary needs to be more effective, with an attractive sign and a person there to welcome anyone who stops by
- Review red pads and communicate with visitors
- Target age groups for new membership:
 - 20 Somethings
 - In college or recent college graduates
 - Attending school in the area
 - Previously a part of the youth or choir programs
 - Social events
 - Late 20’s and 30’s Age Group
 - Newly married, still single
 - Trips and activities
 - 40’s and 50’s Group
 - College planning, financial aid
 - Social activity ~ singles, couples and combined

- Empty nest conversation
 - Events – plays, bowling, etc.
- Parents
 - Previously baptized their child at FPC
 - Invite kids to youth programs
 - Speakers and social programs during the time kids are in youth programs
 - Activities with child care for adults
- The missing 20-somethings: give them ownership of some projects/programs, get them more involved in the worship service, find service opportunities especially, but not necessarily exclusively, for them
- Partner with Caldwell University to provide programs for 20-somethings
- Provide more offerings for adult Bible classes
- Offer education on other religions
- Offer “Women in the Bible” study groups
- Start a Bethel Bible class
- Revisit some of the traditional aspects of worship
- Have three hymns each week and always include one “oldie but goodie”
- Add a contemporary service
- Provide alternative worship opportunities
- Sunday School program for individuals with special needs
- More large print Bibles and hymnals
- Better training for lay leaders, including Sunday morning greeters at worship
- Ensure elders and deacons are more visible
- Utilize lay leaders in worship beyond Confirmands
- Recognize church membership anniversaries
- Revisit the Mariners program
- More people need to be involved in the Church Life Committee
- Host family events: pot-luck dinners, picnics, camping trips, etc.

Youth Leadership

The children and youth of our congregation represent the future health and vitality of FPC. We need to continue to invest in our youth as well as let them lead us. They have told us what excites them and how they want to be disciples. We need to give them the opportunity to thrive through programs that are meaningful to them.

Suggestions

- Support our youth in designing and leading a contemporary worship service.
- Support our youth in refurbishing the existing Youth Room as a place of their own, to facilitate youth fellowship and devotion groups.
- Let youth organize and manage a community based coffee house to build and develop youth relationships within the congregation and in the community.
- Build and extend existing youth programs. Organize additional youth service projects and mission programs. Offer non music-based alternatives to our strong youth music programs.
- Innovate Sunday school. Offer less stringent curriculum, classes with mixed ages, less classroom structure, use creativity (e.g. make stained glass windows with Bible verses), and teach through drama or group service projects.
- Tap into local seminaries for additional resources for youth leadership.
- More parent involvement
- Sunday school: Connected curriculum; tie in the lessons to what is happening in church
- Sunday school: improve teacher training
- Middle school missional program (there is one that works well in Montclair)
- Improve non-musical options
- Youth room overhaul: first option: to move the youth room to the fifth floor rooms. One room would function as a coffee house setting/devotional area, the other room could be more of a rec room with a pool table, foosball table, ping pong table, etc. Second option: redo the room downstairs.
- Review the effectiveness of the BLAZE program, incorporate successful aspects of the former Youth Club
- Contemporary service: designed and manned by youth with an adult advisor—to be offered on a Saturday or Sunday night
- Offer local mini-missions to occur on our campus or in conjunction with other area churches, modeled after The Pittsburgh Project
- Children and their parents feel that they are being forced to choose between music and youth programs

Communication

FPC is “the best kept secret” in our community. Other than church members, our community knows little about what we do. We need an outreach presence that showcases our worship, programs and events. All new programs should be branded as a “New Beginnings” initiative.

Suggestions

- Develop a communication strategy that uses video-capture and transmission equipment to better reach our congregation and community. Post worship and other events on our website, You Tube, cable television and other forms of media that will particularly appeal to our youth and young adults.
- Adult programs are good but need better publicity and communication to pump up attendance
- True church calendar available online with detailed event info and updatable by committee chairs
- Calendar notices in local papers
- Hang signs in local stores to promote activities to the community
- Social media: group pages for different committees that are visible to all members
- Social media: group page that includes everyone who participated in New Beginnings, as well as updates with the status of our suggestions, requests for assistance when needed
- Coordination with community activities; church should be open during street fair, Memorial Day parade, live nativity, etc.; provide guided tours and activities inside, have organ music playing, games on the lawn for children and a food stand
- Parallel and coordinate communication in several different ways—bulletin, email, Facebook, etc.
- Advertise with Tap, Patch, I Love Living in Caldwell's
- Ministerial association: better communication of events that we can do together. Share them in the Progress and Patch—need to ask paper to have a spiritual section—as done in Montclair.
- Posters, info boards in colleges
- Posters, signs, balloons, lights and other means of attracting attention for specific events
- Electronic billboard on the lawn to invite the community to participate in activities and to worship here
- An attractive pamphlet/leaflet of information about FPC could be prepared and used not only at church but in the community. Realtors, funeral directors, hair and nail salons were mentioned as possible routes to make them available.

- Committees and groups need to learn to feed information to Communications Specialist in the church office to publicize activities
- Recognize, create awareness and thank those who have served our church well
- Create awareness of church leaders, e.g. list at back of bulletin
- Stephen Ministry: increase exposure to encourage more involvement

Building & Grounds

FPC is located in what is likely the most significant historic building in our community. It serves as a spiritual landmark and a beacon of God's presence in our midst. We must act as stewards of our church facilities to ensure it will continue to be a physical asset in our community for generations to come.

Suggestions:

- Proactively invest in the maintenance of church facilities to preserve its historical features and to ensure energy efficiency
- Develop a plan to enhance the church to be more welcoming to all, including better outside signage and lighting, needed internal painting, bathroom remodeling, etc.
- Invest in and utilize state-of-the-art audio-visual technology to enhance worship and Christian Education activities
- Convene a beautification committee
- Redo the gym floor to offer recreational activities for youth and adults
- Building costs should be regularly reported to the congregation