

## **Becoming a Missional Congregation**

A Report from the GPS Team – April 2014

### **History:**

In the spring of 2013, after discussions at a series of Session retreats led by Pastor Spaulding, the Session appointed a Strategic Planning Team to study in more depth the strategic questions facing First Presbyterian Church over the next decade. The team began meeting in the fall, and we have spent several hours together:

- orienting ourselves to the assignment we have been given
- studying Scripture
- discussing basic questions such as: who are we as a congregation, why are we here, what mission is God calling us to in the community?

Team members conducted interviews with leaders in the community, and we discussed and analyzed what we heard. Our most important findings will be summarized below.

The term “strategic planning” may conjure up different images in our minds. For some it might suggest matters related to funding, or facilities, or staffing. Our early discussions led us to start at a more foundational level and ask: What mission is God calling us to have in our changing community? And then to ask, what programs, facilities, funding, and staffing might we need to fulfill that mission. We adopted the name GPS Team because we are seeking God’s directions to the place where he’s leading us.

After several meetings together, and before we move to the phase of formulating recommendations, we would like to share a summary of what we’ve been learning.

### **The Future of First Presbyterian Church:**

It may go without saying, but our starting point is this: First Presbyterian Church as we know it today will not be the same in ten to fifteen years. As our members age, many of the familiar faces we see every Sunday will no longer be here. We anticipate that it will become increasingly difficult to staff our church and maintain our facilities the way we currently do. Our situation is far from unique. We share it with practically every congregation in Dixon, and with practically every similar congregation in our presbytery.

At the same time we’re convinced that Dixon has a desperate need for a vital faith community and a vibrant FPC. Our neighbors have a variety of deep needs that can only be met through the redeeming love of God in Jesus Christ. The churches of our community, including FPC, have gifts we can share with our neighbors—skills, wisdom and experience that could help our neighbors make better lives for themselves. We also have a message to share. True, lasting change in our neighbors’ lives will only come as people receive the love of Jesus and follow him as his disciples.

Our first strategic priority must be to turn our eyes to the community. Mission must not be just one thing we do, but the central and most important thing. Our mission in the community must guide everything else. That doesn’t mean that we should neglect caring for the church family, or worship, or education. But it does mean that all these things will reflect and feed into our ministry outside our walls. That is true also as we think about our building, financial resources, and staff. How will we make God’s love for our community our priority?

### The Needs of Our Community:

In looking towards the community, we identified many needs within all Dixon age groups. Our young children need a place to play in addition to programmed afterschool activities. Teenagers are looking for available jobs in Dixon, but lack the skills to find and retain employment. A greater link between the business community and young workers needs to be created.

Furthermore, childhood obesity and education in healthy lifestyles are growing concerns in Lee County. Bullying via social media is a new issue that parents and children are navigating. Mentoring for children of all ages may help prevent children from entering the court system. Parents are looking for assistance with their children's education and family-friendly activities. Families are also seeking out parenting skills with respect to social boundaries and basic child care.

Our senior citizens are in search of community members to teach basic technology skills. The Senior Center needs volunteers for all areas of their mission to serve those in Dixon. Elder abuse, specifically, financial abuse is on the rise. Connecting senior citizens to the resources in the community needs to be supported.

Our community leaders emphasized that any new programs in these areas should be done by various members of the faith community and not one specific church. A new mission located outside the church building would be perceived in the most favorable light by the individuals that we are trying to reach.

### Foundations for Reaching our Community

In our explorations of turning our focus toward mission in the community, some recurring themes emerged.

*Passions and Gifts:* For our mission to be effective and sustainable, it must grow from who we are as a community of Jesus' disciples. The passions and the gifts of the congregation need to be identified if we are to know how to reach out beyond our building walls in mission.

The welfare and education of children is one obvious passion that we have, given the Stronghold and vacation Bible school programs we have hosted, and local school mentoring and food programs we currently support in varying degrees. This effort comes from our gifts of compassion and teaching.

We support families in need of food, the homeless, those needing emergency monetary relief, the victims of physical disasters around the world, and others—most of which is in the form of material resources. And so we have a passion to support the needy with our financial gifts.

Many of our members come from a life's work of caring for the disadvantaged, the elderly, the sick, the poor, and troubled youth, using both their passion to improve lives with their gifts of education and skills.

Many others have shown a passion for volunteering in both formal settings like PADS and informal settings to help those in need, using their gifts of faith and family experience. And our gifts of compassion and love have always led us to care for each other's needs consistently and beautifully.

*Relational Evangelism:* Matthew 28:19 says, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” We have been charged by God to evangelize and guide others to be followers of Christ. Therefore, GPS believes that relational evangelism, both internal and external, is necessary for our further involvement in the community.

Though it seems like a natural response, it’s not always easily practiced. We desire deeper friendships between members and want to build rooted relationships with the unchurched people in our community. These types of relational networks demand more than just sharing of our time and money; if we are to be witnesses for Christ we must also share his message.

For any of this to be achieved, enhanced education in faith-sharing will be vital, for all associated. In addition to identifying individual gifts and learning to use those gifts for sharing God’s message, the learning process may also involve instruction in apologetics, how to invite others to become disciples of Christ, and how to be a supportive church

*A Missional Spirituality:* Conforming ourselves as a congregation to actually live and act as Christ did is a whole other story. The wonderful mission that we now largely do comes from our giving of time and finances at what has been called by mission scholars the “relief level” of mission. To reach the deeper needs of others and help make a “structural change” in the lives of others—both social and spiritual—a deeper spiritual life needs to be present in us. Without this deeper spirituality, we will not be able to agents of structural change for others. That is, to help others change their lives and to recognize Christ as their focus, we must be growing deeper in our own relationships with him. To have the energy and love to share with others at their points of need we will need a deep connection to God in our own lives.

### Obstacles to Becoming a Missional Congregation

Moving toward being a more strongly missional congregation will have its obstacles. The average age of our members is the late 60s. The social makeup of this church differs from the community around us—we are older, wealthier and have a higher level of formal education on average. These, however, can be assets to mission rather than obstacles.

But perhaps the greatest obstacle to missional change at First Presbyterian Church, Dixon: our congregational culture and traditions are strong and highly valued, but focused within our walls much more than outside. To move into the community at a much deeper level while maintaining our care for each other will be a transformation for us. The Treasures in Clay Jars study the committee is reading puts it this way: “Congregations that are becoming missional ... are aware that change is hard, often painful, but unavoidable if Jesus is the one who is forming them.”

### Conclusion:

God has given our congregation the most important things we need to be a faithful, mission-focused congregation. Above all else he has given us faith in Jesus his Son and the presence the Holy Spirit in our lives. He has given us passions and gifts, and there are many opportunities in the community for us to direct our passions and gifts to respond to the needs of our neighbors.

At the same time, going into our community in mission in a more intentional way will stretch our faith. It may move us beyond our comfort zones as we interact with people who may have different life experiences than we have had. To share our faith with words as well as with deeds will be a new experience for many. In calling us to mission the Lord may ask more of us—in time, talent, and treasure, in love and compassion—than we have been accustomed to giving. A growing mission and a deeper life of faith go hand-in-hand.

This report was shared with the Session and discussed at a Saturday morning retreat held on May 3. We hope to schedule a series of listening sessions over the next few weeks to invite responses and input from the congregation. Once we have incorporated the things we learn from those discussions, we will enter the second phase of our work—making specific recommendations about how we might live as a more intentionally missional congregation to be instruments of God’s blessing in our community.

Respectfully submitted,

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