

“A People with a Purpose”
GPS Team Final Report to the Session and Congregation
November 2015

Introduction

In Spring 2014, following several months of prayer, study, listening, and discussion, we presented our first report, “Becoming a Missional Congregation.” In our report, we shared what we have come to believe God is saying to us about the future direction of First Presbyterian Church. To quote from that report:

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.

The future of the church will be found in turning our eyes in new, intentional, and creative ways toward our community—as we are led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Our calling is to be an instrument of God’s blessing, making our gifts available to God in ways that could help our neighbors make better lives for themselves.

We recognized that this sort of mission doesn’t happen on its own. So we also presented two additional priorities that support this central one: relational evangelism and a missional spirituality. True, lasting change in our neighbors’ lives will only come as people receive the love of Jesus and follow him. We have a message to share, and our ability to be God’s messengers depends on learning how to communicate the message with confidence and humility. We will find the spiritual resources we need to go into the community in life-changing ways—love, energy, faith, and hope—as we grow in our personal faith and discipleship.

How is God calling us to pursue these strategic priorities?

Since our first report to the session and congregation the GPS Team has continued to seek God’s direction and to formulate recommendations to guide our church over the next several years.

Our major activities have included:

- 6 listening sessions involving 76 individuals to discuss the findings of our first report
- further refining and deeper probing of the three strategic priorities we identified in our first year of work: mission in the community, relational evangelism, deepening spirituality
- asking what form our recommendations should take
- coming to understand in a deeper way the central and indispensable role that spirituality must play in becoming fully the church God intends us to be
- a daylong retreat with the session in April 2015 to share what we’ve learned, to ask the session to adopt the three strategic priorities, and to begin to discuss how to live according to them

- the unanimous adoption of the three strategic priorities by the session at their April meeting as their understanding of the direction in which God is calling us
- a mandate from the session to formulate our learnings into a new Purpose Statement to guide us
- the adoption of the Purpose Statement by the session at their August meeting
- the addition of three additional members to the team to help finalize and communicate our work – Mary Mobarak, Dan Montague, and Phil Vella

In partnership with the session, we present this Purpose Statement as our best understanding of how God is calling us to be a faithful, dynamic, and missional congregation.

The Purpose Statement

***As followers of Jesus Christ,
we will, by our intentional actions,
seek a deeper relationship with God,
listen for the Spirit's call to mission in our community,
and prayerfully lead others
to know the joy of God's love,
and to realize God's purpose for life's journey.***

The Purpose Statement serves as our best response to the mandate we were given by the session. Early in our meetings we discovered that the questions posed to us about programs, finances, buildings, and membership growth pointed to more foundational questions of identity, purpose, and mission. Who are we as FPC? For what purpose has God called this congregation into being? Who are the neighbors God has given us today? The Purpose Statement leads us continually back to these fundamental questions.

The different elements of the Purpose Statement are directly connected to the three strategic priorities, and the Purpose Statement is intended to keep those priorities constantly before us. It is intended to help our pastor, session, committees, and staff ask good questions about *why* we do the things we do. It's intended to stimulate prayer, searching and listening for the Holy Spirit's leading in new directions.

We've learned a great deal about all these things, more than we can share in a single report. As the GPS Team members disperse to serve on the session, the committees, and in other ways, we will carry that learning with us. The Purpose Statement is an effort to encapsulate that learning in a brief and memorable form.

One of the most important things we've learned is that new programs or initiatives need to grow from a renewed relationship with God—a joyful, grace-filled, open relationship that turns our hearts, minds, intelligence, vision, and above all else, love toward God and the people who live in our community.

We haven't presented a program or a set of well-defined steps to follow. The challenges we—and all churches—face are great. Some say the Church is going through a once-in-500-years time of turmoil and rediscovering its identity, purpose, and mission. We also learned that changing the trends of the last generation is, at best, a process of ten or more years. Our best hope for the future is to become as true to God's purposes for us as we can by his grace through the power of the Holy Spirit.

In the section that follows the six original GPS Team members have expanded on each part of the Purpose Statement to flesh out our best understanding of what it means for us as First Presbyterian Church.

As followers of Jesus Christ

Of all the ways that we might be able to answer the question, "Who are we?" the most basic and important answer is that we are followers of Jesus Christ. This church exists because Jesus has invited us into a relationship with him that makes it possible for us to experience the joy of God's love. Jesus' invitation is also a call to follow: to offer our lives completely to him and to live according to his teaching and example. That includes following him into the community in mission and sharing the good news of the kingdom of God. By following him in this way we will grow to realize God's purpose for our lives.

There are other words that we might be able to use to describe ourselves, such as Presbyterian, that point to our particular traditions and ways of doing things. At the same time, we come from varied backgrounds and experiences, and we often have diverse views about how to faithfully follow Jesus. Our most common bond, the one thing that unites us all, is our desire to follow Jesus where he leads.

we will, by our intentional actions

Fulfilling God's purposes for us as a church means that we need to act intentionally. Being intentional begins with reflecting on everything we do and asking whether it helps us fulfill those purposes, or is just a worn out habit, or something that makes us feel comfortable with ourselves. In light of all the challenges that come from the world outside the church today, simply doing more of what we've always done will leave us further out of touch with each passing year. Fulfilling God's purposes requires constant attention, discipline, creativity, and perseverance.

A primary distinction between local service organizations and the church is that we are called to serve others with a purpose – connecting that service to the good news of Jesus Christ. This requires intentional actions on our part, moving forward in faith not by chance but with purpose and thoughtful planning. Intentionally making God central to our actions, both for others and ourselves, will help reconnect our congregation to the biblical purpose of making new disciples of Jesus Christ.

seek a deeper relationship with God,

A key to deepening our relationship with God is to understand that we need to find him by looking within ourselves, and letting God have more of us. God has given us through Christ all that we need to give ourselves to him. If we accept his grace, then our intentional acts of prayer, worship, reading and studying Scripture will reshape us into the likeness of Christ.

Prayer is a matter of talking and listening to God in a very personal way. Telling God our concerns, then quieting ourselves to “hear” him speaking to us, will lead to an intimate, personal relationship with God. Worship, whether as an individual or as a congregation of believers, can take the form of praying, studying Scripture, listening to the Word preached, singing, confessing our shortcomings, caring for one another--any act which brings us closer to God is an act of worship. Reading and studying Scripture over time will move us toward understanding his purpose for each of us by showing his interaction with humanity, and pointing us to Jesus.

As we commit to these acts and develop a deeper understanding of our purpose, the Spirit will lead us to a passion to serve God’s people with less hesitation. People in today’s world are spiritually hungry and will recognize it when they meet people who are genuinely connected to God. As each of us allows the Spirit to lead, we can then view every situation through God’s lenses and break down the barriers in our lives that keep us from freely and joyfully following Jesus in whatever ways he calls us to follow.

listen for the Spirit’s call to mission in our community

Mission in the future will be different from what we have seen in the past. Mission will be a continually evolving part of our church life. There are many needs in our community, and we need to create new missions that take us outside our building. Our greatest gift is to reach individuals by establishing a relationship with each new person we meet through our mission. We must use our energy, time, passions, and resources to help others.

In discerning where and how to use those qualities we will be required to have a stronger relationship with God. We must actively listen and reflect in quiet prayer where the Spirit will lead us. In worship and in our contact with the community the Holy Spirit will reveal avenues to help others in their hardships of life.

As we look beyond ourselves and the walls of First Presbyterian Church, we will see where we can show God’s grace to others. In our new mission projects we will demonstrate God’s love to our neighbors. God is asking us to step out in faith, trust in him, and to humbly serve.

and prayerfully lead others to know the joy of God’s love,

While meeting people’s material and social needs is an important step in long-term Godly relationships, a human’s deepest need is spiritual. Once we know the word of God, we have a responsibility to share it with others, regardless of where we are in our own journey. Our witnessing will come from our own experiences of God’s love and grace in our lives. As our neighbors find a welcome among God’s people, and as they share in the life of the church, they may be drawn to faith in Christ.

To lead others, we need an unshakable belief in God and his word and to be committed to continual prayer, which builds confidence, brings inspiration and understanding, and will help to sustain us throughout each day.

and to realize God's purpose for life's journey.

God does have a purpose for each of our lives, for today, tomorrow and all time. This is among God's great gifts to us. As we daily find and fulfill that purpose, as we give to God glory and honor we will find joy in our life's journey, even when we face life's trials and difficulties. When we live to glorify God we will have real freedom to be who God created us to be. Life's journey may not look the same in each of us, but as long as we live with faith, God will use us in a mighty way.