

THIRD-WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
2008 Mission Study Report

*“I the Lord thy God will hold thy right hand, saying unto thee, Fear not;
I will help thee.” (Isaiah 41:13)*



Submitted by the Mission Study Committee:

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MISSION STUDY COMMITTEE REPORT

VISION STATEMENT

We are the congregation of Third-Westminster Presbyterian Church, existing to give glory to God through Jesus Christ. We are committed to study and profess God's word to others as presented in the Holy Bible. Through our Christian service, we will introduce people in all their wonderful diversity to Jesus Christ, and help them grow and expand their understanding of him.

To fulfill our mission, we embrace the following values accepted by the Session and congregation and set forth in our church covenant:

Believe the best about each other.

With all of our differences, we name the same Lord and Savior, seek to serve the same God, and advance the work of the same Church. We will deal openly with each other and keep those with whom we disagree informed about our intentions. We will neither speak disparagingly of those with whom we disagree nor be silent when others do.

Commit to serious, on-going Biblical study and prayer.

We will engage in Biblical and theological study together, to deepen our understanding of our call to lead holy lives that proclaim God's righteousness and peace.

Avoid confrontations that create winners and losers.

We will pray for each other, so that we may faithfully serve God, follow Jesus Christ, and be guided by the Holy Spirit on a daily basis.

We also must stay mindful that some of our former ways of serving the congregation and neighboring communities may no longer serve God's commission for this church; and that we may need to try different things to attract, nurture and retain members. Hence, we pledge to give our hearts and minds to daily Christian study, seeking first to listen to the needs and concerns of others before we push our beliefs and opinions. Living in this way, we will grow to love each other as Jesus Christ loved us and magnify our Lord through our daily actions. Thus, we become God lights in this world. Amen.

Mission Study Approach and Process

The Mission Study Committee members were selected and approved by Session in January 2008. Rev. Birda Buzan Ferguson, our interim pastor, moderated the first meeting, explaining the purpose and scope of our duties. Eight members formed the initial committee, representing a cross-section of ages, ethnicity, gender and years of membership within the church. Rev. Patricia Briegs joined us to serve as our advisor from the Elizabeth Presbytery Committee on Ministry (COM) at our January 27th meeting. She explained to us the roles and activities of a mission study committee and how our work becomes the building blocks for the PNC (Pastoral Nominating Committee). We held bi-monthly meetings through the winter and spring months to develop the mission study timeline/activities plan by June. Feeling a strong need to clarify in our minds and hearts what our individual service would be as members of the committee, we conducted an intense S.W.O.T. (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats) analysis over two meetings. A com-

mon thread uncovered during the S.W.O.T. was a collective concern that our church's future is hanging in the balance between doing what we have always done and dying, or stepping out on faith and finding better ways to serve God and his people. In March two of our younger members decided to resign from the committee citing personal responsibilities that prevented them from continuing. Although their resignations were accepted, we were left with voids in key voices needed to articulate what spiritual "things" attract and retain younger members. The remaining six of us selected to use the Research Strategies for Congregations manual published by the General Assembly Council of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to design the congregational survey and feedback instruments. We opted out of using the Percept Congregational Survey, which was employed in the 1999 mission study report. It was our collective belief that a more simplified process and customized questionnaire would add greater value to our mission study. During this period, Rev. Briegs's health prevented her from continuing on as our advisor. In June Bonnie Ruggiero took over as the COM advisor and has steadily supported our efforts to date.

We selected the Coffee Hour as the forum for gathering information from members and visitors. In March, the committee presented the network map that showed where active members live and the distance we travel to worship on Sundays. In early April, we unveiled our Wall of Memories to capture significant dates and special events in the lives of members and friends attending our church services and activities through the years. Participants were invited to list their special memories on a large paper banner for five consecutive Sundays in April and May. During one of our April meetings, Donald Schiessel, a long-time church member, former Clerk of Session and church historian, accepted the committee's invitation to share thoughts and stories about the origins of Third-Westminster Presbyterian. He recounted colorful stories about the congregation and pastors of Third, Madison and Westminster churches, how these separate congregations decided to unite, the challenges they faced, and the hopes and dreams that followed through the years for the newly united Third-Westminster Presbyterian. A common thread in each of his stories was the need for members, then as now, to stop looking backwards, seek common ground on which to build the future, and look to what needs to change to continue our church ministry.

We also distributed a paper-based survey to members and friends attending the Sunday, May 18th regular service. Additional questionnaires were mailed to members' homes, including enough copies for every member residing within the same residential address. This mailing went to approximately 100 members. Thirty-three percent of these surveys were returned by the end of June.

Church History

The congregation of Third-Westminster Presbyterian Church has been serving the Elizabeth, New Jersey area since 1851. We are a unification of three congregations joining together over the years—Madison Avenue, Third, and Westminster Presbyterian churches.

We have a very rich heritage in Elizabeth. Third Presbyterian was established in 1851—Westminster in 1866—Madison Avenue in 1877. In 1972, Madison Avenue Presbyterian merged with Westminster and on January 1, 1984, Third Presbyterian Church merged with Westminster Presbyterian Church to form the Third-Westminster Presbyterian Church. We are a congregation of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which is one of the oldest denominations in America.

On January 1, 1984, our current church began with co-pastors—Dr. Guy E. Lambert Jr.(Third) and Dr. Robert W. Scott (Westminster) as Co-Pastors. These two pastors led us through to the late 1980's when both retired from the ministry having served their Elizabeth churches a combined total of 62 years. Rev. Alan Gripe served as our Interim Pastor from 1988 thru October 1990.

In December, 1990, Rev. Thomas W. Hall became our Pastor and led us through November, 1997 when his sudden death saddened our congregation. Rev. Charles Brackbill served as a Supply Pastor from December 1997 thru March 1998. Rev. Howard A. Bryant Sr., served as our Interim Pastor from April 1998 thru August 2000. Rev. Calvin Hsu, who arrived in September 2000, served as our Pastor until October 31, 2004. Beginning April 19, 2005, Rev. William D. Eggers served as our Temporary Supply Pastor until October 31, 2006. On November 1, 2006, The Rev. Birda Buzan Ferguson began serving our church as Interim Pastor.

Our past is important as we remember those who provided us with the foundation to remain a viable witness in the Elizabeth community. We are currently 134 members doing the work of the Lord on this one-acre of property located at North and Salem Avenues.

Our membership's racial and ethnic background has changed in recent years. We are beginning to truly represent the multi-cultural community living in the area surrounding our Church. Roughly two-thirds of our active members live within a five-mile radius of the church and our history is rich in this community. Our present denotes a concerned fellowship of Christians seeking God's guidance, love, and understanding as we minister within our congregation and to the surrounding community and the world.

Our Challenge

We have roots that have been part of the city of Elizabeth for nearly 160 years. During that time, the city of Elizabeth and the Presbyterian Church have seen many changes. At one point, the city had seven thriving Presbyterian Churches. Third was organized by several members from First and Second because of, among other reasons, the need for more space in a crowded, growing congregation. Westminster broke off from Third because of the distance many of its members had to travel to get to church on Sunday morning and the danger associated with traveling across the grade railroad crossing at Broad Street.

Now we find the opposite happening. Third-Westminster is the result of three congregations having to merge in order to survive. And now, those three congregations, only 25 years after the last merger, have fewer

people attending on a Sunday morning then the 75 original founders of Third Church. Yet we are a welcome presence in the city as we have programs that reach out to the community offering assistance, and sometimes housing to the homeless; running a Music Institute that offers low-cost instruction in the arts via a four-week program in the summer and additional training on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday nights during the regular school year; helping people in the area with food baskets at Easter, Thanksgiving and Christmas; a small but active Presbyterian Women's Association that reaches out support to many worthy causes; and running a Christmas gift program for local underprivileged children.

The challenge to our congregation is to keep these programs running while trying to find an appropriate way to attract more families to become a part of Third-Westminster so that we may strengthen our outreach and worship God through our love of Christ, and remain a vital part of this community. The task of our new pastor will be to inspire and stimulate in us greater Christian support in the challenging years ahead.

Outcomes

We have sought to find and clearly present the collective voices of Third-Westminster Presbyterian Church. This committee, however, would be guilty of negligence if we did not state for the record that the quality of information gathered during this mission study was below our expectations. There are unspoken conversations that needed to be heard from more members. We have missing dialogue about members' hopes and visions for the future because they were not shared with the committee. The richness that this dialogue could have given is not found here. Because of this situation, we worked partly from assumptions to compile the report and articulate what the congregation's vision is for the future church. We used reported pieces of an incomplete puzzle to state what matters most to many and what the congregation expects to accomplish in this century. However, all evidence shows that just opening our doors on Sundays and having only a few community outreach programs will not be enough to keep our spiritual blood flowing or our church alive.

MISSION STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

CORE VALUE RESPONSES

Commendations – Among the commendable features Third-Westminster are the following:

- The core values I see are the members helping out with children during coffee hour and also the church telling the congregation about everything happening in the church.
- I would really love if I could do additional things in the church by adding my talents and praise to the Lord before or after the sermon.
- Tradition as away to serve the ministry, caring for our members and friends, service to our church.
- Caring; outreach to the poor; very concerned about youth; music oriented.
- Fellowship and Music Institute.
- Traditional worship and willingness to be diverse.
- Willingness to help others in need. long-standing friendships abound with long time members.

Recommendations - Among the recommendations made are the following:

- We have a core of members who are faithfully involved in the work of our church. Unfortunately, many are called upon to do too much because there is no one else to do essential tasks.
- Unfortunately we have not added younger adults to our church and we seem to be a group of old people (mainly).
- I would like to suggest and see that we discontinue any further activity or comments directed towards “healing”. At present, we have no need for such and I find that recent services and other activities directed towards “healing” were very inappropriate and demeaning, causing more confusion, harm and awareness to nonexistent problem, than any good.
- I see us as still hung up in our past. With very few exceptions, I find congregation to be very harmonious and close-knit group, afraid of not being able to survive in the future. Being an older congregation, I would like to see our empathies to be on new younger members, thereby insuring our future survival.
- Need for new members.
- The new pastor process has dragged on long enough. Our church needs to set new goals with a new mission statement for a declining membership. The new pastor needs to be able to challenge the members to become more active in the giving of their time & talent to the church. The goals established needs to be realistic.
- Too few members willing to do the work.
- Many of us are elderly are do not drive at night. We cannot do as much as we formerly have done. We’ve been through a bad time and there’s an underlying feeling of hostility which disturb me. I feel we may never complete our healing and it is disturbing.

Analysis of Mission Study Questionnaire

The committee conducted a mission study survey that consisted of fifteen questions. The questionnaire was prepared to gather the views, feelings and desires of the congregation about the goals of the church. Active members, who participated in the survey, gave their feedback and displayed great concern and kindness for securing a better future for the congregation. Approximately one third of all active members responded to the survey.

Based on the questionnaire responses, the church collective voiced real concerns for the health of Third-Westminster, particularly the church's future longevity. Alas, we have a core group of members that consistently attend church service and accomplish mission activities. A concerted effort is needed to encourage new members to join our church. To sum up the voices of the survey, we are slowly perishing from lack of new energy and members.

The church has a great number of activities and programs, however, the community does not seem to know about the opportunities we offer nor join once they have explored involvement in an activity. Our committee, therefore, has identified the need to select a dynamic spiritual leader with energy and enthusiasm and a multi-generational approach who can utilize the collegiate outreach of our members as the objective. The implication of the study shows that there is a need to establish or strengthen our network and visibility in Elizabeth. We have to spread the word that we are here and open to people with an interest in diversity and working collaboratively to build a community of caring, Christians. Thus, we offer the following recommendations as foundations for the PNC and our next pastor:

- Create an atmosphere of open, respectful communication in and outside of the church. *Our next minister will need to develop positive ways of giving and receiving Christian counsel and inspire members to channel solution-based thinking for handling problems that will arise.*
- Nurture leadership among new and long-time members of the congregation. *Our next minister will need to be a leader-mentor who is inspired to groom leadership among various age groups and genders in the church.*
- Establish a bigger presence for Third-Westminster in the Elizabeth community and help individual members find the appropriate roles to play in the process. *Our next minister will need to facilitate more opportunities for our members to interact with church groups in and around the Elizabeth community.*

A copy of the Mission Study Questionnaire and the data collected can be found on the following pages.

Third-Westminster MISSION STUDY QUESTIONNAIRE

Graphic representation of questions 3 through 12.

