

REPORT TO SESSION
FROM DISCERNMENT TASK FORCE

October 31, 2011

*Without vision, the people perish.
Proverbs 29:18*

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Table of Contents

Appendices	ii
SUMMARY	1
WHAT WE DID	1
WHAT WE FOUND	3
CORE VALUES.....	5
CORE VALUE 1: A WARM, DIVERSE, AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY	5
CORE VALUE #2: EXPLORE AND DEEPEN OUR FAITH.....	8
CORE VALUE #3: PARTICIPATE IN ENGAGING WORSHIP.....	9
CORE VALUE #4: DISCOVER GOD’S CALL FOR OUR LIVES.....	10
CORE VALUE # 5: PARTICIPATE IN FAITHFUL SOCIAL ACTION	11
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS	12
I. Build on our tradition of warmth and hospitality	12
II. Nurture our members’ spiritual development.....	14
III. Continue to offer exciting, innovative worship experiences.....	15
IV. Provide a wide variety of ways for people to engage in social action	15
V. Long-Range Planning.....	17
VI. Improve Communication to and among the Congregation	18
VII. Improve our Financial Planning.....	19
VIII. Continue our Commitment to Church Growth	21
FINAL OBSERVATIONS	22

Appendices

- A. Staffing, Membership and Attendance History Chart from 1970-2010 Annual Reports
- B. Historical Highlights, Programs, and Mission Initiatives Chart from 1970-2010
- C. Timeline of Significant World Events from 1970-2010
- D. Charts of Membership, Attendance, and Giving patterns – Source PC(USA)
- E. Ten-Year Trends Report on FHC - PC(USA)
- F. How Does Forest Hill Stack Up in the Presbytery of the Western Reserve?
- G. Financial Analysis
- H. Census data
- I. Demographic Information from Cleveland Heights City Hall
- J. Copy of Church-Wide Survey
- K. Summaries of Survey Responses
- L. Copy of Interview format and questions
- M. Interview Summaries
- N. “Listening Posts” Description and summary
- O. Focus Groups Summary
- P. Gratitude Offering Description and summary
- Q. Report on visit to Antioch Baptist, Church of the Resurrection, Church of the Saviour, St. Paul’s
- R. List and Summaries of others churches studied online
- S. Bibliography of articles, essays, and blogs by experts in the field of future church trends
- T. Summaries of articles, essays, and blogs by experts in the field of future church trends
- U. List of additional recommendations to consider in future

SUMMARY

In response to the difficult budget decisions faced last January, Session called a task force to discern Forest Hill Church's core values and how those values can shape faithful decisions about church growth, financial stability, and FHC's future. The Discernment Task Force was asked to re-evaluate who we are as a congregation, and to discern God's call for FHC, by reviewing our past, present and future.

This Report affirms FHC's core values and suggests ways to connect them to both short-term and longer-term decisions about program, staffing, budget, benevolence, and our building. It describes a vision of FHC at its best for the coming year and the coming decade.

Although this Report provides insights and ideas for Session to consider, it is not a strategic plan. Analyzing all of the different approaches to budgeting, spending, programs, and stewardship that we heard and imagined is beyond our scope.

We recommend that Session, its Ministries and Committees, and Staff use this Report to:

1. Ensure that annual budgets reflect our Core Values;
2. Encourage long-range planning at every level of ministry;
3. Build contingency plans into all budget requests and proposals;
4. Leverage the passion around small groups; and
5. Choose a limited number of coordinated strategies to focus on, recognizing they cannot all be implemented at once.

The recommendations in this report ask a great deal of the leadership of the church. Those who already provide so much of their time in service to God through their involvement at Forest Hill Church are to be praised. Many of our recommendations will require even more time, energy and resources. Therefore, Session must listen, pray, and discern what to do when, what to save for later, and what to let go.

WHAT WE DID

Overview

From our first meeting in May 2011, we approached our task from three different perspectives: historical, present, and future. Meeting every two weeks, periodically checking in with Session, and allowing space and time for the Holy Spirit to guide us, we set out to discover the core values that define and drive passion for our church, and tried to discern where God is calling FHC to go next.

In the Biblical tradition, a community's identity is revealed principally through story. We understand who and what God calls Forest Hill Church to be and to do through the stories that define our history and our present. These stories point to our future and it is these stories we tried to capture.

Historical Review

To learn the story of our journey from past to present, we studied 40 years of Session minutes and Annual Reports to determine historical staffing levels, program activities, and budget processes and allocations. From the last 10 years of data available from Presbytery, we compiled and analyzed the membership, attendance, and giving patterns of FHC and other comparably-sized churches in our Presbytery. We researched historical and present data on population distributions and trends and looked at demographic shifts within the eastern inner-ring suburbs to build a clearer picture of the environment in which FHC has existed. Detailed graphs and charts of our research can be found in the Appendices.

From our research, we learned that our present challenges are not new— we have faced and weathered similar difficulties before. However, we also discovered patterns that can help us better prepare for the future. And we drew courage and comfort from the knowledge that FHC has a remarkable history of responding faithfully to developments in the external world, discerning its call, and acting on that discernment. These insights influence our recommendations.

Present Audit

To discern who we are as a congregation in 2011, we used a variety of methods to uncover stories of why people join, stay, participate in and contribute to FHC. Many members shared stories with us during three after-church “Listening Post” sessions. Others shared what they were grateful for at FHC and presented them as offerings at the July 24 worship service. We interviewed 50 members, visitors, and previous attendees—representing a variety of ages, lengths of FHC association, and levels of involvement—to intentionally include voices and stories from multiple facets of our internal community. Finally, we conducted a church-wide survey, available in print and online, to which more than 100 people responded.

In both the survey and interviews, we asked people why they support the church both financially and with gifts of their time and talents, what issues they think we are/should be addressing, and what their vision is of Forest Hill’s future. The responses we received contributed significantly to our discernment process for understanding FHC’s core values. The results are summarized in the Appendices.

Because one faith community’s stories can be influenced by those from other faith communities, several Task Force members visited four comparably-sized churches in the greater Cleveland area: Antioch Baptist, Church of the Saviour (Methodist), St. Paul’s Episcopal, and Church of the Resurrection (Roman Catholic) to hear stories about their membership, worship, programs, and missions, as they responded to current financial realities. We also visited the websites of growing vibrant faith communities, locally and across the country, including Bay Presbyterian in Bay Village, Parkside Church in Bainbridge, Federated Church in Chagrin Falls, Saddleback Church in California, Church of the Savior in Washington, D.C., and the Mars Hills churches of Rob Bell. Stories from these churches are found in Appendices Q-R.

Future Trends

Finally, we investigated future trends by studying shifts in culture, demographics, attitudes about organized religion, and identifying best practices among congregations. We observed three shifts that may affect FHC in the future:

- a nationwide shift in the attendance and giving patterns of Americans,
- a shift in the demographics of Cleveland Heights and other eastern inner-ring suburbs, and
- a shift in the role organized religion plays in America today.

We researched these shifts through numerous articles, essays, and blogs by experts in the field of future church trends in an effort to make educated guesses about the future FHC is moving into during the coming 10 years. These future trends and best practices inform our recommendations for the future FHC might realistically encounter. Details of the data studied can be read in the Appendices.

Distilling and Synthesizing

We distilled the mountain of data gathered using a variation of “action research” methods – we gathered information, analyzed it, discovered themes within it that led us to seek more data, and repeated the analysis cycle, stopping only to meet our deadline.

Dr. Mary Grace Neville supported us in our distillation and synthesis. Dr. Neville, a former FHC member now teaching at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, is an expert and researcher in the field of organizational and human behavior particularly on relationships that lead to creation of well-being. Dr. Neville led us in a workshop analyzing the stories and information we received and helping us translate those into core values. Thanks to her coaching of both us and our process, and her help in adhering to disciplined methods, we believe our work represents a sound first step at clarifying FHC’s core values.

Finally, we studied and re-studied our findings and insights, working to shape them into a Report that would be useful not only for the current Session but any future groups that may be called to continue the discernment and planning process. Given our time constraints, we recommend that this Report be a platform from which further, focused, inquiry and analysis can continue.

WHAT WE FOUND

Forest Hill Church has a long history as a church committed to social justice in action — sometimes referred to as “the Outward Journey.” More recently, there has been an increased focus on spiritual development — or “the Inward Journey.” These two priorities co-exist in a culture of passionate community – grounded in hospitality, relationships and personal connections with God, others, and ourselves. Perhaps more than anything else, it is this duality of spiritual development with corresponding social action and the joy it unlocks which defines the FHC community.

Specific Findings

FHC is a joyous place:

- FHC is a community which is comfortable with who it is, and comfortable that each person is different from everyone else.
- We have a long history of engaging in community-bonding social events.
- Our current membership builds relationships in a variety of small groups: social, spiritual, and mission-based.
- Fostering additional small groups should increase membership numbers and commitment.

We have strong leadership:

- FHC has enjoyed a remarkable continuity of professional staff leaders: we have had only three Senior Pastors since 1945.
- FHC is blessed with powerful pastoral, musical and youth leaders, who respect each other and desire everyone to become who they are called to be.
- We need to be deliberate about nurturing our professional staff: financially, spiritually, and professionally.

We are committed to spiritual education and faith development for all ages:

- Christian Education is a long-standing priority at FHC. During the 1950s and 1960s, an entire new wing was built to house Sunday School classrooms and offer an on-site Nursery School.
- Our commitment to Christian Education continues today. According to the PC(USA), from 2000 to 2010 the average total Christian Education enrollment for churches our size was around 249, and the average for all PC(USA) churches was 111. FHC's average Christian Education enrollment during this period was 330, with 245 reported in 2010.
- Continuing to provide superb programs for children, youth, and adults is one of the best ways to attract and keep new members.

We want to make a difference in the world:

- We have a remarkable history of living out our faith in the world, through hands-on projects such as the Hawthornden Men's Group, our long association with Garden Valley, food programs such as Meals-on-Wheels, and the Forest Hill Church Housing Corporation (now Home Repair Resource Center).
- Changes in the way we work and live have reduced the number of hours available for volunteer activities. Consequently, we seek service opportunities that are both meaningful and suited to individual gifts and passions.
- Our congregation expressed a desire for more opportunities to be together not just in worship but in hands-on mission opportunities. They are fed, led and ready to serve.

We are a healthy congregation:

- Historical membership figures – particularly those from 30 or 40 years ago when church membership was a societal expectation – may not reflect heart-felt commitment.
- Today's level of congregational involvement is better measured by average worship attendance, numbers of givers, and active participation in programs. By these standards, the number of core

committed members of the FHC faith community has remained remarkably stable over time, as has the overall financial commitment to Forest Hill Church.

- To fulfill the Great Commission and the Great Commandment, we are called to reach out to and invite the un-churched community. Doing so will require re-thinking worship, communication, and what it means to be a church member.

We face financial challenges:

- Past budget shortages have been cyclical in nature, occurring frequently in our history. Past financial crises were met through staff reductions, creative allocation of funds, and postponement of needed building maintenance and repairs.
- Our Endowment Fund has been a valuable and significant financial factor, allowing FHC to budget more expansively than current giving allowed by repeatedly funding capital, operating, maintenance, benevolence and program start-up needs.
- Despite the shortfall that led to the creation of this task force, our finances are relatively healthy. The strong support of the 2010 “Restoring the Building” campaign along with the modest decline in pledges following that campaign in the midst of the deepest recession since the Great Depression demonstrate the financial commitment and resilience of our membership. However, FHC, as with most institutions, has a few donors that make up a significant percentage of the total giving, putting us at risk for short-term disruptions. Increasing our membership and conservatively budgeting for the long term can help ensure stability and mitigate this risk.

CORE VALUES

The thoughts expressed by the congregation in the interviews, surveys, and listening post stories, described five key attributes of Forest Hill Church:

- Being a warm, diverse, and inclusive community
- Exploring and deepening our faith
- Participating in engaging worship
- Participating in faithful social action
- Discovering and responding to God’s call for our lives

Remarkably, as we sorted our findings from the congregational research, we discovered that they matched well with the statements contained in the “Welcome” brochure displayed in our pew racks. This discovery confirmed our faith that the Core Values below track closely with what has been true in the past, and demonstrate a key component of who we are: a church blessed with continuity of leadership and strong self-awareness of who we are and what we want to do as a faith community.

CORE VALUE 1: A WARM, DIVERSE, AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

Why Community Matters

There is power in being a warm community. We find God’s presence in our lives through community experiences with each other. We honor our differences and find warmth in our shared humanity.

Fellowship restores, rejuvenates, and empowers. It gives strength, and allows glimpses of the Kingdom. We strive to cultivate a warm, diverse, inclusive community in a sacred physical space, where people at many stages of their faith journeys, and with a variety of needs and gifts, may welcome each other.

How Warmth is Created and Maintained

Hospitality is quintessentially Forest Hill Church. As one visitor remarked, “I came in out of the cold to the warmth of your hospitality.” A survey response observed that “the love evident in the congregation is a terrific model for me. The friendships I have made with FHC folks are some of the deepest I have.”

On the other hand, while there is great warmth, not everyone perceives it exactly the same way. For example, it is very easy to feel out of place in Fellowship Hall after church – small groups are in animated conversations, and that can feel intimidating to visitors, to new members, and even to long-time members.

It’s easy to become so caught up in socializing that we fail to notice the un-engaged among us—the lone widow or newly divorced father standing off to the side wondering where they fit in. Care needs to be taken that “unity” does not become “exclusivity” and that “cliques” do not interfere with engaging the stranger, the “other.”

The good news is that we have a solid history of hospitality on which to build. Intentional discussions within our community on ways to be even more welcoming to outsiders can only strengthen what is already core to our identity, and lead to church growth.

How Inclusivity is Created and Maintained

Welcoming and including diverse members within our community has been a major area of focus since the early 1970s when only 2% of Cleveland Heights residents were minorities, through 1990 when the percentage rose to 37%, to today’s current 48%.

During the past 40 years, FHC has raised awareness and understanding of racial issues while increasing its own inclusivity both in numbers and in the content of worship, governance, and social interaction:

- 1971 - Session passed official statement recognizing and celebrating the inherent worth and equality of all races.
- 1977 - Board of Church & Society focused on housing & school desegregation.
- 1978 - Session adopted the Interfaith Council’s Affirmation of Desegregation
- 1987 - Session studied and supported General Assembly’s Overture on Fair Housing & Racially Diverse Community
- 1987 to 1988 - Board of Church & Society commissioned a report on Racial Reconciliation and conducted a Racial Reconciliation Survey.
- 1992 - Session adopted Commitment to Inclusivity and renewed its commitment to Racial Reconciliation.
- 1995 to present - Ministry of Worship and Music Director Anne Wilson worked to increase the multi-cultural nature of our worship, and especially our music

- 1997 - “Diversity” led the list of 5 Vision Priorities by Session, and the Board of Church Growth studied how FHC welcomes different races.
- 1998 - Hosted the Greater Cleveland Gospel Fest; education and worship focused on African-American Worship Heritage.
- 1999 to 2000 - Established Sister Church program offering shared worship and adult education programs with Heights Presbyterian Church and Christ Our Redeemer AME;
- 2004 - When Heights Presbyterian Church closed, FHC welcomed many of its former members who have contributed to both racial diversity and enhanced leadership at FHC
- 2006 to present - Encouraged and invited by Anne Wilson, racially diverse musicians from Cleveland Heights High School joined FHC Choirs, opening hearts and minds, increasing experience and comfort levels, and fostering personal and institutional relationships across racial barriers.
- 2011 - FHC joined with the YWCA to present a 4-month Racial Conversations program. At least one small group is continuing as an off-shoot of the dinner-time conversations started through this project, with more envisioned.

Areas to Focus on in the Future

- **We need to do more than merely greet—we need to extend invitations.** One way we can do that is by becoming more intentional about extending invitations. People crave the welcome that comes from being invited in, whether to the church, to a small group, or even to a conversation. More than one interviewee identified a general sense of welcome upon being invited to enter the physical space of the church, and a further welcome upon hearing, “Gee, you are uniquely qualified. Can you contribute your gifts to help us do X and Y?”
- **People have a need to tell their stories.** Other churches we spoke to noted that in communicating with visitors, they are very intentional about inviting visitors to tell their story, early in the conversation, by simply asking, “What brings you to this place today?” That invitation often opens profound communication.

Another church calls their welcome team members “Hosts” rather than “Greeters” in recognition of the fact that they are not merely there to say, “Hi. How are you? Good to see you.” Rather, they serve as hosts welcoming people into God’s house, and are trained to approach people as if they were welcoming someone into their own home. “Hi. Are you looking for a place to hang your coat? Can I get someone to show you where the nursery is?” The point is not just to greet, but to engage with everyone who walks in through the door.

- **Deliberate communication policies are a part of being an inclusive community.** We pride ourselves on being a “permission-giving” church. FHC is not the kind of community that thrives on strict policies and rules. As a result, information is sometimes shared informally, without realizing it has not been shared as broadly as it might warrant. This can lead to a perception that leaders and processes are not as transparent as they could be, and to feelings of exclusion from the greater faith community.

- ***Members need to stay informed.*** It is not enough to simply disseminate information in a wide variety of ways in hopes that people will find and read it. The congregation needs to be educated—during worship, in new member classes, in small groups—of their responsibility to actively seek out the information provided by their faith community.
- ***Re-examining FHC’s place in an increasingly diverse community.*** It’s difficult to find our place in the broader community without defining the term “community.” For some, “community” refers to the members of FHC. But does it refer only to those who attend regularly? What about those who attend only sporadically? Or those who might attend in the future?

For others, “community” refers to the people living around us. But does that mean only the people living near in the neighborhoods surrounding our residences or does it mean those near our church building? Does it refer to the even wider community of Cleveland Heights? If so, then does it also include nearby East Cleveland or the more distant suburbs in which some members live: Shaker Heights, South Euclid, Mayfield, Pepper Pike, Mentor, South Russell or even Berea?

CORE VALUE #2: EXPLORE AND DEEPEN OUR FAITH

Why Faith Development Matters

We believe the Holy Spirit is pervasive in both our inner beings and our outer lives. We commit to practices and conversations exploring what it means to believe that goodness can and will triumph against evil, and to discover fully who we are called to be in a larger faith community seeking God’s kingdom here on earth.

How Faith is Developed

Every faith journey requires time focused "inward" — through spiritual disciplines of prayer and reflection, and time spent "outward" — through social action in which we serve as Christ’s hands and feet in the world. Strength for these "outward" activities comes from faith developed along the "inner" journey.

Because the inward and outward journeys enrich each other, balancing the two requires intentional and frequent attention. Survey and interview responses expressed a profound desire to explore what it means to be faithful, and to deepen understanding of the inward faith journey. Over and over again, we heard a powerful need to know God, to be in relationship with God, with others, and with ourselves.

Areas to Focus on in the Future

- ***Small Groups.*** Both our historical analysis and our study of best church practices showed that faith develops best in small groups. Small groups build relationships, community, a sense of belonging, and the safety and trust that comes from intimate sharing between a limited number of people — all necessary ingredients for strong faith formation.

- **Lay Leadership.** The call of Clover to the position of Director of Lay Leadership reflects the importance this faith community places on spiritual growth. Out of that have come the Faith Leaders series and the large turnouts for small group Bible study. That demonstrates to the Task Force the depth of this community’s hunger for growth, and the leadership that accompanies it.

CORE VALUE #3: PARTICIPATE IN ENGAGING WORSHIP

Why Worship Matters

We gather weekly to worship in community. We find inspiration and provocation through quality sermons, music, ritual, and prayer in presence with others. We value the sacred space in which we worship. Through engaging worship, we deepen our relationships with God. By worshipping regularly, we also hold up a beacon of light to others who struggle in their lives or their faith, and we provide a place where seekers can simply “be,” without judgment and without pressure.

What Makes Worship Engaging

Our members indicated that worship includes more than merely listening to great preaching. “Hearing” can imply a passive reception, whereas “participate” implies a more active role in the worship experience. Worship also includes music, prayer, communion, and the joy of being together as a community. Engaging worship sometimes means contemplative worship, and sometimes means rocking the house. This does not mean a theologically bereft “Praise” service however. Our research indicated that this congregation craves more intellectual challenge than that. Nonetheless, there is support for exploring different liturgies, and experimenting with our weekly rituals.

Areas to Continue Focusing on in the Future

- **Preaching.** Engaging preaching openly addresses topics on which not everyone will agree. It is both celebration and challenge, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable. Our research found wide and deep respect for preaching the Word at FHC, whether by John or Clover or our lay preachers, and is clearly a main factor in people’s perception of FHC as a place of worship.
- **Prayer.** Prayer is at the heart of worship. FHC prays in communal spoken prayer, in music, and silently. It is where and how we seek after and are found by God. Prayer can praise God, lament or commit to action. We confess our sins not to experience guilt, but to acknowledge our shortcomings, in order to be freed from them, and restored to God and to each other.
- **Music.** Along with preaching, the music program at FHC is widely regarded (both inside and outside FHC) as among the strongest anywhere. Anne presents a wide array of musical genres, all executed with grace, theological sensitivity, and the expressive detail that separates art from noise. Through her multi-cultural musical choices Anne deepens congregational spirituality by introducing different languages and shades of color to our worship. In addition, the extra

musical events (concerts, recitals, AWE services) at FHC open our sacred space to people who might not otherwise have entered.

- **Staff.** Universal acclaim for our worship staff registered throughout our research. There exists a palpable sense of mutual respect, empowerment, and stability that resonates throughout everything associated with our worship experience.

CORE VALUE #4: DISCOVER GOD’S CALL FOR OUR LIVES

Why Call Matters

Across the top of the walls in Fellowship Hall are these words from our Mission Statement:

***“Discovering God’s call;
Celebrating the Spirit’s presence, and
Witnessing to Christ’s transformative power.”***

Understanding what God calls us to be and do, both individually and collectively, is a process of learning to listen and discern Spirit within us. We honor the power of discernment in community with others, and we therefore seek to foster opportunities for all who choose to listen.

It begins with a welcoming, open and inviting atmosphere — safe, sacred spaces where we can explore our faith through:

- **Worship**, in which we repeatedly hear “you are a beloved child of God,” and which engages us around themes of inclusion and love, provides the sacred emotional and physical space to listen to God, and empowers us to change the world;
- **Small groups** where non-judgmental feedback about one another’s gifts can be shared;
- **Education and spiritual disciplines** designed to improve our ability to listen for and discern God’s call for our lives; and
- **Leadership training and discernment** that test our understanding of God’s call and match people with programs through which they can make a difference in the world.

How to Find Call in Community

Discerning call is an act of individual listening; the ability to hear it is developed in community. FHC celebrates individual faith journeys, and the fact that no one is judged for who they are or are not. Along with discerning what it is we are called to do, there is a strong sense that FHC tries to be as careful about what it is that people are NOT called to do.

Areas to Focus on in the Future

- Continue to honor the importance of discernment and call
- Explore new ways to discern call: individually, in small groups, and as a congregation.

CORE VALUE # 5: PARTICIPATE IN FAITHFUL SOCIAL ACTION

Why Social Action Matters

FHC is committed to engaging in social action because God calls us to live in ways that outwardly demonstrate our internal faith. Many people are attracted to Forest Hill because of its commitment to social action. Some seek a community in which to live out their call to effect social change. Others may not feel called or gifted in this area but desire to be part of and support a community focused on following Christ's instructions to care for the least among us.

How We Define and Engage in Social Action

We participate in a myriad of ways – individually, in organized groups, in and outside our church walls—and for a variety of reasons: to directly relieve suffering, to bring attention to where human systems fail to embody God's justice, and to conduct our daily lives with integrity. As we faithfully conduct ourselves, we use our gifts to amplify God's righteousness.

The relative emphasis between internal and external focus has shifted over time. In the 1970s and 1980s, the church appeared to focus almost entirely outward to action in the world. The last 15 or 20 years have seen a heightened focus on the inward journey of spiritual growth. This focus is seen in the Ministry of Vocation and Development's fostering of spiritual development that produces lay leadership. As more and more people experience discernment and call in Faith Leader and other small groups and are led to respond, then the interrelationship between the inward and outward journeys is revealed.

Areas to Focus on in the Future

- ***Recognize Different Definitions of Social Action.*** Social action means different things to different people. It is most often an expression of the desire to work for justice¹. "Justice," however, carries its own set of baggage, having been invoked on multiple occasions in the service of revenge and retribution. Nevertheless, "justice"—in which the rights of all persons are respected—remains a definition of the Kingdom of God that we are called to create on earth.
- ***Nurture the church community itself.*** Conducting an active ministry for the people within a faith community generates a reservoir of power and strength that facilitates ministry to others, and ultimately strengthens the faith community. The Deacon's CARE program and other nurturing activities give people ways to use gifts such as compassion, hospitality, serving, or teaching to strengthen those called to action outside of FHC.

¹ Micah 6:8, NRSV: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POSSIBLE NEXT STEPS

Without encroaching on Session's rights and responsibilities to direct the next steps, we see 8 areas that offer opportunities for growth. Because everything we do should reflect FHC's core values, four of the groups are loosely organized around the Core Values described in this Report, with additional groupings around Long-range Planning, Communications, Financial Planning, and Church Growth.

(Recommendations relating to the "Discerning Call" Core Value are distributed among the other areas of recommendations.)

Session members are urged to evaluate these recommendations based on the needs of the church as a whole rather than the needs of their individual ministries.

I. Build on our tradition of warmth and hospitality

Making FHC a safe and welcoming space for members and visitors requires ongoing effort. People can feel disconnected even within the context of a "community" and places such as Fellowship Hall after worship can be intimidating even for long-time members.

Fellowship Hall after church

Yes, it is lively, and yes, the people are warm, but many people need to feel invited into conversations. When people fail to invite others, they can be perceived as part of "cliques."

- Provide non-threatening, non-conversation driven reasons to go into Fellowship Hall after church. Encourage Session, ministries, small groups, etc. to set up rotating displays, information tables, audio, and computer visuals.
- Encourage the pastors to continue after-worship conversations with people in the coffee hour, when possible. They are gifted at making people feel welcomed.

Social Groups

FHC Social Groups have long been organized by specific age ranges. People join their own age group and tend to socialize solely within that group. However, visitors and new members are often uncomfortable trying to break into what are sometimes perceived as closed, or at least long-established, groups. Long-term members in one age bracket who are drawn to the activities and people in a different age bracket report similar hesitancy.

- Consider defining social groups less by age, and more by stages of life. Several groups have begun encouraging people of all ages to participate, but it's hard to convince people that they would be welcome so long as the groups continue to be described in terms of age.
- Conversely, offer at least one age-based group for our youngest members. People in their twenties on the cusp of adulthood can benefit from a community of peers their own age to develop friendships and learn how to be part of a trusted, nurturing faith community.
- Consider forming groups around new member classes, for a specified length of time, but let them continue if they desire to do so.
- Encourage formation of additional groups around particular interests.

- Explore more year-round social activities, such as the softball team, that naturally attract those in their 20s and 30s to get and keep them connected.

Intergenerational events

More events for all ages were cited as being needed to foster relationships.

- Other churches have had success with small group dining experiences – getting together once a month for fellowship and a meal. This allows working, retired, young and old to gather and break bread in a way that builds the kingdom in an easy and accessible fashion.

Reinvigorate FHC’s identity as a permission-giving church

FHC has prided itself on this quality in the past, and continues to claim it today, but more and more people have reported hearing “That’s not the way we do it” when new or younger members make suggestions or offer assistance.

- Consider replacing this “That’s not how we do it” phrase with the phrase—and attitude—of “Why not?”
- Recognize that people whose ideas are rejected out of hand tend to withdraw future offers of help, or withdraw from the community altogether, especially the younger generation and newcomers who may never have been part of a church before.

FHC Table Manners

We all need gentle and regular reminders of our responsibilities as hosts and hostesses of God’s house, and that we sit at God’s table.

- A frequent visitor described bringing her granddaughter to a Lenten dinner but deciding to leave after they were turned away from three different tables by people who said they were “saving seats” for others.
- Our congregation should be mindful of the needs of others who are having difficulty finding a seat at meals and place the concerns of others above their own comfort. E.g. “Let me help you find a spot” or “Why don’t we move to a new table?”

Community Care

Congregational care is a vitally important key to church growth because of its community-building potential. Our current Deacon CARE program has done a good job at ensuring comprehensive care through the effective dividing up of members into smaller, more manageable groups. However, there are two areas to be evaluated. The first is that the amount of care given to FHC members and frequent visitors in the form of meals delivered, transportation given, visits made has varied over the years. The second is the actual representation or ability within the CARE groups of people able and willing to provide care.

- Consider increasing the amount of care offered to new parents and young families. For example, one area church provides meals as a deliberate outreach to an often un-churched demographic. Instead of just delivering flowers or offering a meal when a new baby is born, they commit to taking a weekly meal to the family for up to six months. Those families become evangelists,

sharing stories about how deeply their church cares for them and inviting other families to attend.

- Consider similarly extending the care given to the families of those with a hospitalized member, offering meals and visits to those whose spouses are sick or have died.
- Leverage technology to devise new ways to organizing opportunities to both give and receive care, such as on-line sign-ups for delivering meals.

Continue our Commitment to Being a More Diverse and Inclusive Community

Because what constitutes “community” is constantly evolving, the issue of what it means to be a “diverse and inclusive community” needs to be addressed explicitly from time to time. We believe that now is one of those times, and recommend Session consider encouraging a small group to convene around this issue.

II. Nurture our members’ spiritual development

Education is a powerful tool within the FHC community. Historically, our adult education has focused around social action. Today, the adult education program reflects a renewed commitment to spiritual development that infuses people with energy for social action.

Adult Education

- Recognize that investing resources in spiritual development programs creates more than faith-filled members—it develops members who are more inclined to identify themselves as key community members, invested enough in FHC to offer more of their time and treasure.
- Continue offering exciting adult education programs such as the Kerygma Bible study groups, or a comprehensive faith overview covering material similar to that offered to the Confirmation Classes for youth.
- Consider regularly offering classes on topics such as spiritual disciplines, gift discernment, listening for call, and faith in action.
- Consider including gift discernment within the new member class process. Encourage new members to complete a spiritual gifts inventory as well as a time and talent survey.
- Pilgrimages are powerful experiences which should be available to more people.
 - Explore local pilgrimage destinations.
 - Consider creating a pilgrimage scholarship fund to allow those with limited financial means to participate in pilgrimage trips.

Intentionally foster the creation of new Small Groups

Small groups help elevate the ideas, opinions, and worth of all involved. They foster involvement, build connections and commitment within the faith community and attract outsiders to the community. They are the strength, the magic, of FHC and other healthy growing churches. We are on the right track; however, we need to increase the number and types of small groups at FHC. A sustainable future rests on how we use the strategic advantage of this heartfelt, deep-seated, powerful and empowering community.

- Consider emphasizing the fostering of small groups as a high priority at FHC.
- Recognize that strong, thriving small groups are not necessarily staff-led or staff-initiated, but result from a culture of lay leadership and a deep-rooted commitment to permission-giving.
- Consider creating a new Session function (whether program, person or ministry) to support the development, birth and success of small groups. The Small Group function would be responsible for developing a platform to facilitate launch of small groups, listening to the congregation and fostering small groups around the gifts and interests of our members.

III. Continue to offer exciting, innovative worship experiences

FHC has long been known for its intellectually-challenging and emotionally-powerful worship services. Today's members report great satisfaction with the sermons they hear and the variety of music offered, and are asking for even greater variety.

- Consider incorporating more liturgical dance, visuals, gospel music, participatory elements and opportunities for silence into worship. When done in a respectful and balanced way, such changes can be seen as exciting and innovating without alienating those who draw comfort from certain familiar rituals.
- Explore ways to offer additional times and types of worship to draw in those who are suspicious of or unmoved by traditional liturgies. A monthly Taize service can draw in those wanting a more contemplative worship experience. Occasional "praise" type services are another possibility.
- Some of these additional services can be offered, not as an extra burden on our pastors, but as opportunities of respite for them. The Lay Preacher program is appreciated and supported by many in the congregation. On occasions when a guest preacher would otherwise be needed, consider using lay worship leaders or having an AWE-type service.

IV. Provide a wide variety of ways for people to engage in social action

There are as many different ways to obey Christ's instructions to feed the hungry and clothe the naked as there are categories of need in the world and FHC's efforts in these areas have been almost as varied. This has been a good thing because it has allowed the focus to change to meet societal needs: fair housing, peacemaking, sanctuary for immigrants, gay rights. The downside is that we sometimes entrench ourselves in programs or patterns of giving and service that no longer fit our members' passions and abilities. Here are some of our recommendations around social action.

Engaged members want more hands-on opportunities to serve

Our members asked for more opportunities to be together, to worship, to pilgrimage, to use our facility, to be heard. Research shows that even those who may be less interested in traditional church activities still highly value hands-on opportunities to serve and make a difference in the world.

- Cultivate more "hands on" mission outreach activities for our congregation.
- Recognize that people want to be asked to help and want to be involved in small measured ways - most don't want to lead a project - but are happy to cook, to plant, to march, to console.
- Members appreciate engaging in meaningful work with others and expressed a desire for hands-on mission opportunities.
- Encourage Justice & Mission to consider a model of discernment – of listening for where the world’s greatest need and the will of God converge—to guide their giving choices.

Consider new ways of measuring and funding benevolences

- Recognize that there are many ways to provide benevolent giving. Consider that many thriving churches do not include a line-item for benevolence in their operating budgets but instead bring individual needs to the congregation throughout the year.
- Alternatively, for those uncomfortable with a drastic change of approach to benevolent giving, consider experimenting with presenting highly-publicized special good will offerings throughout the year, perhaps accompanied with reducing the amount of money for outside organizations to a lower percentage of the pledged operating budget.
- Recognize that our members include those who pledge expecting their gifts to go to outside organizations, and those who are either unaware or unhappy that part of their pledge is used for faith-based grants to outside organizations.
- Other churches raise funds based on the ministry that is being featured – specific fundraising around mission opportunities that are connected with the passion of one or more of its members.
- Consider whether changing how we budget for mission--from a line item to a celebration of a particular mission project – would build energy on the projects in time, talents, treasures and education.

Account broadly for “benevolences”

The methods of allocating funds for benevolence spending and for tracking amounts given have varied greatly over the past 40 years. Many churches recognize that the costs of maintaining a building that can be used for mission activities and paying the salaries of pastors who spend time leading mission opportunities should be counted as part of its overall benevolence spending. In other words, some portion of building use and staff time is realistically directed toward “mission” activity. To the extent that people pay attention to FHC’s “budget” for benevolence, that “budget” needs to convey the scope of its importance in the life of the church.

Educate congregation about benevolent giving

- Consider investigating new ways to publicize how and why organizations deserve and receive financial support from FHC, including:
 - Identifying the link between our Core Values and benevolence activity.
 - Celebrating the financial support given, perhaps through Fellowship Hall displays.
 - Explaining how Justice & Mission decides which organizations to support and what those organizations do with the funds.

- Consider ways that the congregation can provide non-financial support to more organizations.
- Identify, quantify, and communicate the non-financial support given to organizations such as Family Promise (formerly IHN) and Abundance Acres.
- In the time slot now referred to as Minute for Mission, consider focusing more on the sharing of stories and witnessing to faith in action.

V. Long-Range Planning

A key finding in our assessment of best church practices was the importance of having a long-range planning team—a relatively small (compared to the size of Session) group of people with particular passions and skills for envisioning the future and making recommendations to Session. Most of the successes reported by the local churches we visited and those we surveyed online were connected with some sort of long-range planning group.

Long-range planning is central to every recommendation in this Report

We recommend that Session recognize the key importance and benefits of long-range planning.

- Long-range planning is needed at every level: by Session, by Ministries, and by Staff.
- The Personnel committee should continue to encourage staff members to set long-term, measurable goals in a variety of areas.
- Several years ago, each Ministry developed and submitted a five-year plan for its future goals.
 - Consider revisiting those plans now, updating them as necessary.
 - Encourage Ministry plans to be reviewed regularly—perhaps as often as yearly, but at least as often as every 2 or 3 years, to help new ministry members learn from and build on work that has gone before.
 - This year’s Ministry of Justice & Mission demonstrates one way such planning can work. They are targeting homelessness as this year’s focus, and plan to target other social conditions and concerns in the future. Their plans may be updated regularly (e.g. – every 2 or 3 years) and their programs can be evaluated against that plan as they are designed and implemented.
 - Ask each Ministry to imagine “What are you doing in 2012 and beyond that is different based on this information? How is your work meeting the objectives of the church? What are you going to keep, start or stop doing? Ask for goal setting – what are you doing? By when? And why?”
- At the Session level, we encourage calling a team, reporting to and making recommendations to Session, to develop long-range plans for FHC.

Suggestions for creating a Long-Range Planning Team

Long-range plans are best developed by a team whose membership is stable over time (compared to the yearly membership turnover experienced by the former Advisory Council².) The team needs a mechanism for continuity of membership.

- Serving on the team should not be an additional obligation imposed on actively serving Elders and Deacons.
- Team members should be chosen with utmost transparency and publicity. The team should not consist solely of “insiders” but draw upon those in the congregation with demonstrated gifts in the areas of leadership, visioning, creativity and a passion for leading FHC into the future.

General long-range planning team parameters

- Planning should include looking outside the church to see what is going on in the world to which the church might need to respond.
 - Look forward at least 5-10 years and consider what’s coming in the future.
 - Include contingency plans based on different future predictions.
 - Address how can FHC prepare for future changes.
- Evaluate programs and ministries to ensure they are in alignment with FHC’s core values.
- Include contingency/succession planning to maintain the excellence of our program staff, especially key pastoral and music positions.
- Continue development and support of lay leadership.

Use the church more

Imagine FHC as the place where people go to live their lives—not just for worship, but for education, recreation, entertainment, counseling, socializing, relaxation and refreshments.

Plan ahead and be prepared for change

Consider ways of exploring how the FHC community would continue if we were to lose any of our professional staff. Explore ways of educating the congregation about how living in integrity as lay leaders requires remaining open to uncovering the gifts of others within FHC and the greater faith community.

VI. Improve Communication to and among the Congregation

Routinely educate the congregation on a wide variety of issues

- Limiting information to a small number of individuals should require significant justification.

² Advisory Council was made up of 3rd Year Elders meeting monthly to discern items that needed to be brought to Session. This was based on a prior model in which 1st Year Elders kept the meeting minutes, 2nd Year Elders led ministry meetings, and 3rd Year Elders served on Advisory Council.

- Share how budget monies are used, what our “sacred space” (a.k.a. – the building) costs – and why sacred space is important.
- Consider providing more frequent benevolence reporting/education (at least monthly) to the congregation in the Tower, as part of worship, and on the web site. Include not only monies given but the in-kind value of staff, building, and congregants.
- Watch for new ways to publicize opportunities to participate, focusing especially on ways to invite people in who are not already in.

Invite and facilitate congregational input

- Many survey responses and interviewees voiced their hope that we would have a discipline of continuing to ask for their ideas and input in the future. Discuss what that may look like and the implications of doing or not doing this in the future.
- Establish more mechanisms to tell our stories, to be vulnerable and sharing, and to testify.

Report on conclusions and celebrate endings

- Programs need to be evaluated regularly on the basis of how they express or contribute to the Core Values. Sometimes, that means programs end. Each time a program ends, there is experiential learning about what worked and what didn’t work. That needs to be captured, preserved and passed on to the next generation of leaders.
- Many “programs” have a finite life, and should be celebrated for what was accomplished. Evaluate what works and what does not, and communicate that to the next generation of leaders. Seeing programs end frees us for more experimentation. Ending programs with a celebration sends the message that new ideas get tried out here.

Consider increased focus on communications

- Create a formal church communication plan that incorporates all forms of communication to the membership and the general public.
 - A best practice is to have people with the appropriate skills dedicated to the task of communication and marketing.

VII. Improve our Financial Planning

Revamp the annual budget process Each ministry should provide the Budget Committee not just with a budget request but a statement of how any planned expenditures relate to the Core Values, along with specific steps the Ministry can take to eliminate expenses, increase giving, grow our membership, and develop outside revenue streams.

- Each budget item needs to convey the scope of its importance in the life of the church, and should be evaluated against how well it expresses or contributes to FHC’s Core Values.
- Include member(s) of long-range planning team on budget committee.
- Identify where the trade-offs and choices are, and then ask Session to decide. Despite the hard work involved, ultimately trade-offs are healthy because they force the decision process to reflect what is most important.

- Address the issue of how we fund mission giving compared to how we fund our operating budget, and whether the two should continue to come out of the same funds or should be separate.
- Consider moving up the budget cycle from a September start date to presenting Session with a draft by September.
- Consider ways to break the cycle of handing off balancing the budget to the Trustees. Yes, their portion of the budget is the largest, but encourage the Budget Committee to identify possible choices and trade-offs and present them to Session to decide.
- If Session continues its practice of preparing the annual budget before receiving pledges, it would be wise to include contingency plans based on anticipated pledge levels received.
- Consider including in the budget process a step to identify what impact suggested program changes will have on the demand for staff resources.

Develop contingency plans for financial potholes and surprises

Fluctuations in income are a fact of life for Forest Hill, requiring Session to have a plan of action as these fluctuations continue in the future.

- Consider putting a portion of each year's annual income toward a cash reserves fund to weather down periods.
- Although our membership is extraordinarily giving compared to other churches in our Presbytery, the overall budget continues to rely on the contributions of a few key donors. Explore ways to improve our giving profile, especially as it relates to our Core Values.
- Ask ministries to come to budget committee with prioritized spending plans and to include a contingency budget (e.g. 2 or 5% less) in each budget cycle, to improve strategic effect of reductions when needed.
- While the Task Force recognizes Session's historical reluctance to use money from its Endowment Fund for annual operating expenses, we would be remiss if we did not point out that our research uncovered that both Church of the Saviour and Antioch Baptist Church use their Endowment Fund income strictly for operating expenses, and that a percentage of St. Paul's Endowment Fund automatically goes to operating funds as well.
- Develop contingency plans along with budget cycle – e.g. How we can strategically reduce our budget by 1%, 3%, 5% to be proactive in how we make reductions if/when we need to.

Prepare long-range financial goals and plans

- Endowment needs to be better understood and participated in by the congregation as it contributes to essential elements of church life.
- Conduct an ongoing planned giving program with an emphasis on bequest commitments. Consider whether the program should be continuous or periodic, as each has advantages and disadvantages.
- Planned gifts are powerful – those who officially commit to a planned gift typically increase the amount of their annual giving and a planned gift is a gift to FHC in perpetuity.
- FHC would benefit by encouraging planned giving on an ongoing basis. As they are gifts of assets and not cash, nearly any one can make a meaningful planned gift without impacting their ability to meet living expenses.
- As the endowment grows through gifts it could take some of the pressure off of the annual operating budget.

- A Capital Endowment Campaign could provide gifts to support an ongoing building maintenance fund.

Stewardship suggestions

- Continue to be transparent and informative. People value the sense of knowing and as a result 'trust' what the church is doing. This came through loud and clear.
- Consider separate campaigns for specific benevolence projects.
- Most successful campaigns had strong element of structure and personal approach.
- Add an annual or at least periodic campaign to support overall benevolences.
- Consider changing some line items from budgeted to per event for example funding of music (celebratory purchase or in memorial) or benevolent giving. This shift in budgeting allowed for more energy around items of passion.
- Consider giving the responsibility for all contributed or pledged revenue including the annual pledge drive, benevolence funding and planned giving with the Ministry of Stewardship.

VIII. Continue our Commitment to Church Growth

Increase focus on Church Growth

- Consider what membership level is needed to support FHC's existing programs and build reserves and explore new ways of reaching this membership level.
- Efforts to streamline Session led to the incorporation of Church Growth, which used to be a separate ministry, into the Vocation and Development Ministry. Since then, nationwide shifts in church attendance and giving patterns and the role organized religion plays in America demonstrate the central function of Church Growth to a church's future vitality. It may be time to consider restoring Church Growth as a separate ministry of Session.
- A revamped Church Growth Ministry could have three distinct functions: Marketing and Publicity; Welcoming/Engaging Visitors; New Member classes and New Member Assimilation.

Recognize that church growth is more about relationships than ads

- While marketing is important to raise community awareness of what FHC offers, visitors rarely join congregations because of advertising, publicity or high visibility of the church building.
- People visit and join churches after receiving a personal invitation from someone they know who is excited about their faith and their faith community.
- Continue exploring ways to help people become comfortable discussing their faith with others, such as the Holy Conversations small group.

FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Several observations emerged from our work, including the following:

- Budget crises are part of a larger cycle of financial variability over time. The cause of each crisis is a little different, but the outcome is always the same – we work in the shadow of the Holy Spirit to put together a plan. With a plan, the church continues, often stronger than it was before.
- We need to remember that FHC is not called to be “successful.” In fact, the occasional failure is inevitable. We are called to discern and to do God’s will. Nothing is good or bad until God is done with it. Therefore, what we own is the effort, rather than the outcome, so we are empowered to experiment, see what works and what does not. Always in the knowledge and love of Christ.
- FHC is experiencing a shift from old to new ways of understanding the relationship between being, doing, and relationship with God. In the traditional protestant ethic, this was understood more in terms of “doing”: “I do good things, in order to bring heaven into being, so that I get to have an empowering relationship with God.” The new paradigm focuses more on “being”: “I choose to live this way, and that causes me to do good things, as a result of which I come to live in a comfortable place with myself and my community.” For many people, “being” comes before “doing,” and the priorities of the church need to recognize that understanding.
- The proportion of the annual budget going to “benevolence” is at best a moving target, and often diverts attention from what is important. Just keeping the lights on is a part of the mission of the church. It provides a sacred space where sacred work in the world can be started. Our devotion to the work of God is not measured in dollars, but in the degree to which we work to improve justice, to bring about God’s Kingdom on earth. Therefore, hold lightly any financial accounting related to that work.
- Carefully consider these Task Force recommendations. We brought forth the best we had to offer, in our use of our gifts and giftedness, in our time, and in our prayer. We felt the presence of the Holy Spirit, just as does Session. Having said that, doubt and discussion are divine. Implement the recommendations that make sense, change the ones that need changing, and set aside those which are not yet ripe.
- Save this report in the permanent records of the church, to save future groups a great deal of historical research.