

A Preferred Future for Peace

Over the last half of 2013 and the first half of 2014, as part of the Interim transition period between settled pastors, Peace United Church of Christ engaged in an intentional participatory process to discern an agreed-upon future for the congregation. The process was initiated by Interim Pastor Bob Molsberry, with design and implementation help from Michael Cristiani and Governing Body President Brad Schnell. It was modified from a process created by the Rev. Richard Hamm and currently being used in several Missouri MidSouth Conference settings.

The first stage was an all-church gathering to reflect on highlights from the history of Peace (formerly Evangelical) church. A second gathering, held in a world-café manner, lifted up the best of our current ministries. Finally, spread over several neighborhood coffees, members reflected on a preferred future for the church, based on where we've been and who we think we are today. The comments were recorded, gathered up into a single document called the "Future Story," and affirmed by the congregation at the annual meeting in July, 2014. The Future Story has helped guide the Search Team in preparing a Profile for the congregation that will be used to describe this church to potential pastoral candidates.

Future Story

Peace United Church of Christ
2020

Overview

The year is 2020 and Peace United Church of Christ in Webster Groves is looking back on half a decade of growth in excitement, engagement, and vitality. We've been open to change and moving with the spirit for a long time. We are a community buzzing with activities for both members and friends, diverse in our makeup, offering numerable "on-ramps" into the life of the congregation. We are also known throughout the city of St. Louis and across the United Church of Christ as a congregation of extravagant welcome and significant outreach in issues of justice and poverty, environmental issues, and civil and gay rights. We are unique in both in our diversity as members as well as our diversity of thought and practice. We model to our neighbors how to best be a welcoming community of faith.

Our activity is grounded in intergenerational worship which is engaging and creative, and provides opportunities for deepening spiritual life. It's hard to measure our size, because membership is less important than participation. All we know is that the pews are full at both Sunday morning services, and there are other weekend and midweek opportunities for worship and spiritual formation both onsite and off (including online). Nobody thinks of us as "churchy."

Worship

Worship at Peace is truly intergenerational. On any given Sunday children might be singing, ringing chimes, participating in a children's message, working on activity pages that relate to both sermon and church school, sharing crafts from their learning hour, lighting candles, or

participating in an interactive sermon. A nursery for young children is provided, but children and youth generally prefer to stay in worship as a group or with their parents. They like to sit on the carpets on the floor up front. We don't shy away from the painful realities of life, but we provide a safe, grace-full place in which children (and others) can learn about these realities and learn how to live fully and fearlessly with God.

Since we worship "in the round," people are engaged and close to the action. There are quiet moments of prayer, but also outbursts of clapping and dancing as people are moved by music and multi-media (including electronics). It doesn't feel "churchy," as we sit in the round in flexible seating modules and enjoy the brightly lit, colorful space in the sanctuary. Music – both classical and current – is important to us and central in worship. We have multiple musical groups of all ages, and enjoy a variety of instrumentals from organ to guitar, piano, and drums. The music program continues to be staffed to reflect this priority.

We continue to hear the biblical stories, but they are interspersed with reflections from other faith traditions. We are an open congregation, open to understanding other faith traditions and the truth and point of view that they hold which enriches our own Christian tradition. Our progressive Christian theological assumptions are widely known, understood, and shared. We take the Bible seriously but not literally.

People come not only from the Webster Groves neighborhood, but from across the greater St. Louis metro area, because they have found us to be a niche: Open and Affirming, informal, racially diverse, unapologetically progressive in values, and active in justice advocacy.

Community

We are a community center, using our facilities for the good of the neighborhood and the city. People are always coming and going at all hours, all week long. There's a bike repair ministry going on and people can borrow bikes. There's a café where fair trade coffee and tea are served. We share programming with the YMCA.

Church activities are intergenerational and family-oriented, with intentional processes and informative channels in place to help people get active – like activity fairs and regular invitations from the various Teams and Circles. Kids help with job jar, and family outings to the zoo and to church camps are regular occurrences. There are mid-week neighborhood groups, "First Friday" activities, game nights, intergenerational mission trips, and "Dine with Nine" supper clubs. Some of these gatherings revolve around theological discussions or movie nights. Some are just for food and fellowship. We go to a lot of ball games, concerts, movies, and fun things together. We do things with other churches, particularly First Congregational and Sts. Clare and Francis and have a strong connection with Eden Seminary. We meet new people at breakfast events. In a word, intentionality about involving everyone, including friends, drives our community life.

The men's retreat is going strong. Because guys still like bowling and pizza. Women continue to gather as Quilters and Artists, the Mary Martha Group, Moms, and other new configurations that come and go as the need arises. We have fun together, but we also take the time to reflect, be serious and consider issues relevant to men and women and provide opportunities to dig deeper into our spirituality.

Learning

Faith formation is integrated with all other aspects of church life, including worship, outreach, and community building. It's not just done at education hour. Worship is a learning experience for young people. Mission trips and hands-on projects involve all ages; and while we work together we learn about our faith. The Learning Team is trying to help equip families to be better incubators of faith in their children. A youth coordinator position is in the budget.

There are expectations for lifelong learning in our church, and curricula with particular learning milestones for particular ages are used. As always, the questions are maybe more important than the answers around here. Questions are welcome; dogmatic answers are regarded with suspicion. We value being able to agree upon some foundational theological assumptions behind our learning, worship, and service, but we don't regard them as a test of faith. The foundational theological assumptions make it clear that we experience a loving God both in tradition and daily life, that we are disciples of Jesus who embodied God's love by practicing extravagant inclusion, and that we respond to the Spirit that "empowers us to transform hurt into healing." We practice conversation in the round as a method to share perspectives and learn from each other, to support each other, and to grow in faith and action.

Adults get together to explore their faith at varieties of settings and times during the week. Some groups hear from seminary professors, others watch videos, read scripture, read books, or work together to deepen their prayer and spiritual lives. Adult confirmation is taught.

Servant/Outreach

The church prioritizes a few main mission emphases, but allows for multiple interest groups to engage in various ministries for which they have a passion. People are involved with all kinds of projects, and they pull others from the church with them. The church facilities are welcoming, but we are out of the building more, serving the needs of our neighbors.

Social justice issues are discussed and studied, but also acted upon. Both by youth and young people, and adults. We're still making sandwiches, serving meals, collecting food, and building houses through small groups and with other partners. We try to engage in projects where we can meet the recipients, not just send money or food – as with Webster Rock Hill Ministries, Lydia's House, Amnesty International, Habitat for Humanity, and many other organizations, yet we also get involved in national as well as global issues. Our interests are not parochial.

Peace is often in the local news media, reporting on our protest rallies, advocacy efforts, and feeding ministries. There is an intentional effort to keep up this media presence as a tool for evangelism.

We are proudly connected with the United Church of Christ, the church of the StillSpeaking God. We value the resources, the missional opportunities, and the fact that together as a denomination we can accomplish more together than we could as an isolated congregation.

Governance/Finance

Governance is streamlined and transparent, with the GB sharing highlights with the congregation, and orienting new Team members to their roles. The GB helps the congregation discern its vision and communicates that vision with the congregation.

There is clear communication between the various groups and ministries in the church, and with the congregation as a whole. Communication happens in varieties of ways, including through podcasts, blogs, social media, livestreaming, and telephone and USPS. The important thing is that communication is intentional so that no one is left out of the loop.

Administration (at an appropriate level for the size of the congregation) is handled competently and professionally so that policies and procedures are written and enforced. Disagreements are shared openly and conflicts resolved in Christian love.

The congregation has benefitted in the last half decade from an intentional stewardship emphasis which ties financial commitment to ministry and service, and from the increasing generosity of a growing membership to provide the financial resources that enable the fulfillment of our vision.

Facilities

Fellowship Hall is clean, refurbished, and buzzing with activity, and the kitchen has workable appliances, including dishwasher and stove. The kitchen is used for outreach, as we feed the hungry and partner with others.

The building is fully accessible, with no steep ramp but a nice new elevator, and with bathrooms that are inviting rather than scary. In fact, the building is so inviting that it is often used by youth and adults as a drop-in place. Free Wi-Fi is provided. The café provides coffee and tea. There's a fun playground on the lawn that is used by the neighborhood. Church is like a community center.

Our space is shared with other organizations and groups that share our core values.

There is a growing question regarding this beloved building, though. How necessary is it? How long can we afford the upkeep? How crucial is it to our ministry? Can we share facilities with, say, First Congregational? The ministry is the priority, and the building is a useful resource as long as it serves the ministry.

Pastoral Leadership

Our pastoral leader operates out of both right and left brain, and is adept at connecting people to one another. He or she is pastoral and inspirational, but also has a mind for organization and administration and feels comfortable with technology. She/he provides leadership, not just management, for this time of great transition for churches. Our pastor is a keen student of the growing trends in the emerging church in the post-modern world, and helps the congregation understand how to continue to be relevant in this new world.

Sermons are both intellectually analytic and storytelling. She/he does some direct teaching, such as confirmation, but also recognizes and draws out gifts and leadership from within the congregation. He/She is a collaborator and manages a staff team well. Our pastor challenges us on social justice issues and perspectives as well as helping us translate the lessons of the Gospel to our everyday lives and faith practices. He/She is a person who reaches out and supports the congregation as a whole as well as personally. He/She connects.