

NEW BEGINNINGS PATHWAY TO PURPOSE

Report to the Congregation

St. John's Grace United Church of Christ

OVERVIEW

St. John's Grace United Church of Christ has a rich history of worship, service, fellowship, and caring. Church members and participants have experienced a variety and depth of ministries that have blessed many. However, the church in recent years faces a number of challenges: important gaps with the surrounding community, financial challenges, and relational challenges among different populations within the congregation.

What is New Beginnings?

New Beginnings is a service offered by Hope Partnership Services. Hope's mission is to "empower courageous leadership in this new era of God's mission." It has worked with hundreds of congregations in numerous denomination groups. More than 1,300 congregations in the USA and Canada have participated in the New Beginnings process. It is designed to be an intervention for a congregation that needs to make a decision about its future. It is NOT a problem-solving process or consultative process in which you name a problem, seek options, and then fix it. Instead, New Beginnings is a process that helps organizations adapt to new realities. Through the process, we accept the fact that things have changed, and we get to a new way of being by looking at everything at once, naming our observations without "fixing" anything and hold off making any decisions until we have heard many voices, then move quickly toward a decision.

In January of 2020, under the Gratitude Committee, St. John's Grace decided to explore the New Beginnings Program to determine if it was something that we wanted to move forward with. It was also discussed at our Board of Trustees meeting and Ministries Council meeting. Jill White, Lead Regional Mission Interpreter of UCC Church Building & Loan Fund provided a presentation to the congregation to learn more about this program during worship on March 27, 2020. The congregation voted to move forward with the implementation of New Beginnings, which we called our Pathway to Purpose program.

St. John's Grace Leadership met with Peter Wells, an assessor from Hope Partnership, who did the assessment. In addition, Peter Wells held a focus group with members from the congregation to gain additional information for the assessment. Peter provided us with a very detailed assessment, which included but was not limited to our congregational history, current participation, the community, facilities examination, financial review, etc.

In September 2021, the House Leaders began training with Jill White. Once training concluded, a sign-up sheet was posted for any member of the congregation to choose a group convenient to their schedule to sign up for the 4-week sessions.

- ❖ We had six house groups. House Leaders were George & Chere Knoerlein, Charlene Mowery & Paul Rowley, Laura Prinn & Mary Howell, Nancy Gardner & James Burck, Jan Bauer & Greg Satorie, Josie Sapunar & Brenda Dorsch (Linda Spring as back-up).
- ❖ Approximately 36 congregational members participated in the four weekly house meetings.
- ❖ The Group Leaders had a follow-up meeting, after the house group meetings concluded, and summarized feedback from the individual groups, to outline our

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findings for the congregation.

Session 1 – The purpose of this session was to explore what vitality looks like in general terms and to begin thinking about where our church is on the vitality index [vitality: the state of being strong and active; energy].

- a) **Clarity of Purpose** – The goal is to identify a purpose that is fueled by a clear sense of our “Why.” Our purpose should result in empowerment, equipped believers and followers of Christ fully engaged in community transformation, as well as a community engaged with our church, developing their full contextual potential. It is a compelling sense of mission or “why” we exist.
- The consensus was in-between Weakest and Strongest.
- b) **Discipleship or Membership** – Which model sounds most like our congregation?
- | Membership | Discipleship |
|--|--|
| I pay my tithe therefore I should benefit | I pay my tithe to bless someone else |
| The church serves its members | The church serves its community |
| My Pastor is responsible for my spiritual growth | I am responsible for my spiritual growth |
| Worship satisfies me | Worship stretches me |
| Majority rule decides | Prayer decides |
- We strive for Discipleship, but the consensus was in-between Membership and Discipleship.
- c) **Contextual Relevance** – How relevant is our church to our community? How well do we know our neighbors? Do we live in this community, or do we drive in?
- The majority of our members do not live within our 3-mile radius. Our church has the potential to play a more vital role within and around our community. The consensus agreed that we are weakest in knowing the needs of our neighbors and community.
- d) **Passion and Energy** – How would we describe our passion and energy within the church?
- The consensus agreed that we were strongest with passion and energy that centered around our social/fellowship aspects.
- e) **Resources mobilized mission** – What resources do we have to leverage and how can we use them?
- The consensus agreed we were strongest with our resources. We have property and building space available for use, however, we need to value the full potential of what our church has to offer.
- f) **Who are our neighbors based on the assessment (within 3 miles):**

Households

Married Households with kids – 17.5%	Married without kids – 36.7%
Single Parents with kids – 5.8%	Single without kids – 15.2%
Unknown Marital status with kids – 2.5%	Unknown without kids – 22.4%

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Racial/Ethnicity

African American – 16.6%

Caucasian – 68.7%

Asian – 3.3%

Hispanic – 11%

Occupation

Retired – 18.8%

Sales/Service – 31.3%

Blue Collar – 15%

Professional/Technical – 30.2%

Farm Related – 0.4%

Other – 4.4%

Session 2 – The purpose of this session was to help name the condition of our church, honestly, concisely and with hope.

a) ***Passion and Energy*** – What are we passionate and energetic about?

- Fellowship
- Relationships
- Fundraising
- Activities

After discussion, we recognize the following:

- We are weak on Missions.
- Our energy is lacking since COVID 19.
- We need people to step up when needed.
- Our church lacks passion for our youth.
- Inclusiveness is our goal.

b) ***Best At*** – What does our church do well? What needs are crying out in our community?

We are Best At:

Relational

Fundraising and Fellowship

Serving each other and the congregation

Social Activities

Music, Hospitality, Events and Welcoming

What we need to be Best At:

Spiritual Development

Community needs

Serving others in the community

Use our resources and reach out to single parents

c) ***Resources*** – Are we fully utilizing all of our resources (people, facilities, finances)?

- We are not fully utilizing many of our resources.
- There are opportunities to leverage our resources to expand our story.
- We have physical resources, however, we lack long term community commitment. We need to be missional and to mentor our future leaders.

Session 3 – The purpose of this session was to look at our community through God's eyes and see if we can name ways that our church could join in God's mission.

When asked which model of church did our church currently represent the consensus was a Membership church. New Beginnings points us towards, and we

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felt that, we should be more of a Missional church and reach out to the needs within our community. We would have to let go of expectations and be willing to “break the mold” in order to move forward. JESUS SAID GO!

Session 4 – The purpose of this session was to prayerfully consider which future story option presented in the assessment God is calling our church to consider.

Option 1 – “Do Nothing – Stay the Same”

Option 2 – “Redefine our Mission”

Option 3 – “Redevelop the Church”

➤ Our consensus was Option 2, “Redefine our Mission.”

House Leaders Wrap-up

I. *What we learned from this process about our congregation?*

- We do not have clarity of purpose. We need to define our “Why.”
- We have a good but small base of dedicated workers. We need to engage others within our congregation to step up to serve so that we are able to do what God asks of us.
- We have great passion and energy for fellowship.
- We are weak on hands-on missions. We have some mission, but we need much more passion and energy to make that our primary focus. We need more hands and feet for mission, not just make a monetary contribution.
- We have significant resources available to help us implement change and a new future story [property, facility space, available people to be workers].
- We absolutely need a new to change our way of thinking from an internal focus to an external focus.

II. *What we learned from this process about our community?*

- We do not know our community.
- We need more work to fully understand our community's needs.
- There is opportunity to get more involved with refugees and youth within our community.
- Our community is relatively stable:
 - Two age groups of people will be increasing as a percentage of total population in the next 10 years or so – Children 17 and under and Age 65 and over.
 - Households are currently 60% married couples and 40% single parents.
 - Trend for never married or divorced is increasing.
- Ethnically, our congregation is different from our community:
 - St. John's Grace is 95% Anglo, ~4% African American, <1% Other.
 - Our community is 55% Anglo, 30% African American, 15% Other.

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III. *What consensus came from our House Leaders meeting (Future Story)?*

- Our Future Story centered on serving youth, schools, the Catonsville Children's Home and refugees within our community and how we can best mobilize our resources for that purpose.

IV. *What next steps are implied by this decision?*

- Figure out our "Why."
- Develop a Vision Statement.
- Begin a process to determine what the needs are within our community.
- Evaluate current missions and implement new missions programs to serve our community and spread God's word.
- Implement a continuous prayerful, faith-based process to discern where God is leading us.

We are bringing our findings to the congregation to share what was learned from this process. The next step is for the St. John's Grace Trustees to determine an implementation strategy that may include forming a committee to begin redefining our mission, through developing our Future Story and writing a plan.

We know that God has great plans for St. John's Grace, and it is with an open mind and faith that we will move forward discerning what God's plan is for us.