

Wellesley Hills Congregational Church
Strategic Visioning Team
Recommendations
April 13, 2021

The Strategic Visioning Team (SVT) was created by church council and tasked with developing specific programmatic recommendations to enliven the ministry of the church, to be implemented in the next 3-5 years. During 2019, the SVT obtained feedback from members of the church community and from people outside the church community, reviewed material on healthy churches developed from research by the United Church of Christ, and met monthly for discussion.

Before a draft of findings and recommendations could be composed to present to Church Council, our lives and the life of our congregation were changed dramatically -- first by the COVID-19 virus that has precluded any non-virtual gathering since March 12, 2020 and second by the killing of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others, and the renewed sense of urgency many of us feel for rooting out racial injustice in ourselves and all our institutions, including the church. As a result of these twin seminal events, some of our goals and suggestions seemed oddly prescient while others feel a bit frozen in time or insufficiently broad and daring. The SVT has “met” only twice in the last 13 months to review and revise this draft. As a result, this report reflects a combination of earlier thinking and some updating, and is more dynamic and less “completed” than our original intent may have been.

Recommended Goals

1. Enhance a culture of engagement in order to increase the participation of all people (church members of any duration as well as members of the community at large) in church ministries such as
 - a. Service Opportunities
 - b. Adult Education/Formation
 - c. Community Building
2. Provide video streaming of Sunday worship services.
3. Develop additional opportunities for worship beyond the weekly Sunday worship at 10:00 a.m. and the periodic lay-led worship service.

Background

Before we could develop programmatic recommendations (i.e. “what” the Hills Church should do or “how” we should practice ministry) the committee deemed it best to take a hard look at why people choose to associate themselves with the Hills Church? We believe that to be meaningful to our congregants, programs must develop organically from a clear understanding of all the various “whys” that draw us together, rather than being applied prescriptively. Toward that end of knowing our “why,” we posed this question to the whole congregation: “Why are we here as the Hills Church?” Over several weeks in the spring of 2019, we collected over 130 responses in the form of written notes, statements and emails.

The team then spent many sessions reflecting and trying to distill the diverse motivations expressed by individual congregants into a collective “why” statement that could be used widely to describe, unify and communicate what the Hills Church represents to its membership and the wider community. Although we ultimately deferred to settle on a single all-encompassing “why” statement, the exercise was tremendously helpful in cristalising our thinking, and some of the phrases (see Appendix A) that we collectively generated, debated and refined may prove useful individually or collectively in future endeavors and communication efforts.

We celebrated the Hills’ why responses during the September 22, 2019 service, sharing and incorporating many of the quotes from members of the congregation in the service (see Appendix B). We also presented the summary of the gathered why responses in a form of a “word cloud” (see below and Appendix C). In this figure, the prominence or size of each word relates to the number of times that word appears in the overall collection of responses. It serves as a visual to help see the themes as well and the breadth and depth of thoughts and feelings brought to the question of why are we here as the Hills Church. One description of the key words or themes in the word cloud that emerged from the group was:

“God and service, intersecting with community by way of faith and love.”



Following the worship service presentation on our work to date, the team asked the congregation for additional input on how we might further live out our collective why -- the purpose, values and beliefs described in the word cloud -- through different or new programming. (See also Appendix C) The collected responses to this prompt helped guide and formulate the recommendations (the hows and whats) outlined in this report.

Ultimately, the recommendations of the SVT are based on a diagnosis that what our church needs in order to be faithful to our ministry is not a new set of programs, but a new focus and renewed energy for sharing the strengths of our church ministry more fully (with our community).

Feedback from the congregation affirmed that the ministries of this church are meaningful and vibrant. The congregation affirmed a number of the church's strengths:

A. Worship services that feature excellent music and preaching

B. Opportunities for hands-on service, including Family Promise, Habitat for Humanity, African Indian Alliance, Common Cathedral, Restore, New Life Furniture Bank, the Wellesley Food Pantry, coat and children's book drives, Christmas Gifts for low-income families, and intergenerational service opportunities led by children and youth ministry: MLK Jr. weekend of service, Outdoor Church, and Rosie's Place.

C. Opportunities for Adult Faith Formation, including book studies, seminars, meditation group and Bible studies.

D. Opportunities for Community Building, including events such as soup lunches, the Easter egg hunt, the Hoedown, Advent workshop, family nights, and small groups such as "spiritual conversations for women," men's groups, and teas with a minister.

In many instances, individuals suggested new programs for the church that actually described ministries that already exist. We believe that the church will be able to grow our membership as well as the engagement of our members both current and new, not by offering new ministry programs, but by adapting existing ministry programs to be more engaging. Instead of developing new programs, the challenge will be to decide how programs might be more invitational, better communicated, or better scheduled to involve more people, and new people.

The second recommended goal relates specifically to the strength of our worship services. We recognize that regular church attendance in America is now less frequent than in previous decades, dating from a peak of church attendance in the 1950's, and that this trend may be

exacerbated in our community, which has so many opportunities for weekend travel.^[1] In this environment, the ability to catch up on worship services by video recording and/or podcast will help people to feel connected when they are away, and more comfortable about returning to worship in person. It also keeps pace with a common church practice, allowing prospective visitors to learn about our congregation before an initial visit.

Finally, the third recommended goal also seeks to increase people's engagement with worship by offering additional opportunities for worship beyond Sundays at 10:00 a.m. These opportunities may be occasional intergenerational services for different seasons of the year, or even a second weekly service during the heights of the program year.

The United Church of Christ produced a study of growing congregations based on a 2015 survey of congregations. This study noted a number of statistically significant characteristics of the congregations that had grown in worship attendance over the previous five years, summarized in the document here: <http://uccfiles.com/pdf/FACTs-on-Growing-Congregations.pdf> . Of course, not every characteristic can or should apply to every church. We recognize the strengths of the Hills Church in several characteristics, especially the third, fourth, and fifth bullet points, among others. What we hope to develop are the characteristics related to making new engagements, as described here:

- Were better at incorporating newcomers into the congregation.
- Utilized internet and social tools more effectively.
- Engaged in evangelism and outreach to new people.

It is not surprising that growing congregations are focused on ways of engaging with new people. We are encouraged by the conclusion that the Hills Church already offers the kinds of ministry programs that will make a difference in people's lives, and bring people into faithful relationship with God.

How We Can Do It

The STV recommends that these goals be reviewed and adopted by Church Council, and by the congregation, in order to focus attention and energy on the health of our church's ministry.

A group of church volunteers began to pursue goal #2, beginning with exploratory meetings in February, 2020, coordinated by Bill Spencer. Clearly, this horse has now left the barn, and our advance exploration put us in a good position to transition quickly to online services when COVID-19 dictated the closure of our church buildings in mid-March. It would be nice if we could build upon it in the post COVID era -- perhaps live streaming from the sanctuary in real

time from behind the Church website log-in wall to maintain the privacy of celebrations and concerns -- a time of sharing that is so very important to our service and sense of community -- rather than excising mention of our parish register prayer requests from the service altogether. A modestly edited version could then be posted to Facebook, the public face of the website and YouTube.

Goal #3 should be taken up by the Deacons, together with clergy and the director of music, to explore possibilities and plan new worship opportunities for the 2020-2021 church year. A timely suggestion might include partnering with a Boston area church with a very different racial profile (perhaps in Roxbury) for joint services at a time other than Sunday morning, providing not only additional opportunities for worship but also for active engagement with a community that would help to broaden our outlook and understanding of the racial dynamics that we too easily overlook when navigating our white centered world. Such a partnership might also organically lead to meaningful ways of engaging in racial justice work informed and led by those most directly affected by such actions.

Goal #1 is perhaps the most exciting and the most challenging, since this involves a shift in the culture of our congregation. The goal of improving engagement will need to be carried out in multiple ways by the boards and ministry teams that conduct the various ministries of the church, working together with the church staff. Church Council may develop resources, or delegate an ongoing ministry team to develop resources, in order to equip the church as a whole to become more conscious and effective at engaging new and current members in the ministries that we offer. [One example that came up early in our discussions is creating WHCC t-shirts that could be worn by members while participating in community service as a simple way of spreading the good news of our Church's involvement in and commitment to serving the needs of others. Another thought is making greater use of our lawn, both to announce and invite community participation in outreach activities like serving at Common Cathedral or a Habitat build, and to clearly state where we as the body of Christ stand on issues like racial and gender justice.]

^[1] C. Kirk Hadaway and P. L. Marler, "Did you Really Go to Church this Week? Behind the Poll Data," 1998, <https://www.religion-online.org/article/did-you-really-go-to-church-this-week-behind-the-poll-data/>

Appendix A

Draft collective “Why” statements written by Strategic Visioning Team members based on responses gathered from the congregation to the question “Why are we here as the Hills Church?” (listed in no particular order)

Inspired by God, to grow our faith and community, to love each other as people of all configurations and all nations

Inspired by God, reaching out in love

Inspired by God’s grace, reaching out to all in love...

Inspired to grow in love and connection with God and Community

Inspired by God, connected to each other

Connect, grow in faith, love God, community

Connect, grow in faith, love God, and neighbors

Inspired, connected to God, our community growing in faith and love (too long?)

Inspired by God, growing in faith and community (lack of love?)

Growing in faith and community, inspired by God

Impact Lives with the love of God

A community centered in the loving practice of God

A community reaching out in the loving practice of God

Connecting people to the love of God

From a Friend’s church: Inspire the world with the love of Jesus

Seeking a Presence, Serving in Love

Seeking a Presence, Responding in Love

Seeing God in All, Being Christ to All

Seeing God in All, Showing Love to All

Living in faith, serving with love

Appendix B

Selected quotes from the congregation's responses to "Why are we here as the Hills Church?" The following quotes were used during the September 22, 2019 worship service:

- We are here to be a welcoming presence to all people
- To exemplify God's love through service
- To pass our faith along to those who come after us, nurturing faith in children and youth
- To support one another in times of joy and sorrow,
- grounded in the loving practice of Jesus
- To be the hands and feet and heart of Christ in the world
- To worship God through word, music, prayer
- Mom made us
- Because it is Sunday

- Some years after joining and being active in this church, I discovered that people who had been "members" became "friends." This church fostered an environment where I, and my family members made real connections to other people. I also found that in the time of silent prayer during the service that I could get in touch with myself, with what really mattered in my life. It was a moment out of time and place, unlike any other time in my week.

- We are here to serve our community through our outreach and to be examples of acceptance and kindness through our fellowship with one another as well as in our larger communities.

- To be a force for good in the world.

- To grow and live out our faith in a truly caring community of God. To learn to live as Jesus taught. To experience faith, where we learn to give more than we receive.

- To worship God in community.
To ground our lives in meaning,
enjoy deep connection,
share sorrows,
offer encouragement,
and serve others.
To remember to forgive.

- For reflection on the week; quiet contemplation; the inspiration to stay hopeful for a more just world; to learn; to become a better person.

- To renew our faith, inspire our service, pass our faith along to those who come after us, support one another in times of joy and sorrow, praise God for all our blessings, and seek God's nearer presence at all times including times of need. To learn to see God in and be God to each other. To find purpose in life and peace in death.

