

Looking Ahead

A Report to the Session
First Presbyterian Church
Spartanburg, SC

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Rev. Alan F. Dyer

Introduction

My first five months as senior pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Spartanburg have focused on visiting with and listening to as many voices as possible. These conversations have largely centered around two key questions: *“What is it about FPC that you love?”* and *“What do you think is the most significant issue(s) facing First Presbyterian Spartanburg today?”* This report seeks to reflect on the key themes that emerged in response to these questions in order to help our congregation set priorities for the immediate future.

Background

Below is an overview of the groups and individuals who I visited with between March and June 2022 and whose input shapes the observations and recommendations within this report:

- Hosted fourteen small-group breakfasts and lunches with **all 45 ruling elders** currently serving on session;
- Visited with the **Diaconate** at their April 2022 stated meeting;
- Met with **every FPC staff member** individually and in groups during my first two weeks;
- Attended twelve “**Connect With Alan Over Coffee**” events with 105+ church members participating;
- Participated in seven large group “**Meet the Pastor Dinners**” in church members’ homes that were organized around both ministry areas (Sunday school classes, chancel choir, etc.) and geographic area (West side, Andrews Farm neighborhood, etc.);

- Arranged one-on-one visits with various **community stakeholders** from across Spartanburg including other clergy, non-profit leaders, and civic officials;
- Attended a Sunday night youth group, several young adult fellowship events, preschool graduation, Sunday school classes, Bible studies, committee meetings, and met individually with lay leaders of many of the FPC outreach and mission ministries.

Finally, I read Inside The Large Congregation by Susan Beaumont during this time period¹ and reviewed other resources relevant to the life of FPC including the results from the *Holy Cow Survey* which was conducted in 2020-2021 during the interim period.

The Feedback

Many of the conversations and meetings referenced above took place in small-group settings, which allowed participants to more freely share their thoughts and concerns. Even in the larger group gatherings there were many opportunities for one-on-one interactions. Rather than summarize all the comments, I focused on recording verbatim quotes seeking to capture the key themes that emerged. They are presented here in no particular order of significance:

- “*First Presbyterian is vibrant, welcoming, and vital to our community.*”
- “*COVID slowed a lot of our momentum.*”
- “*FPC’s worship and music ministry is a major draw for people.*”
- “*‘West-siders’ sometimes do not feel as welcome at FPC. How can we do a better job of reflecting the geographic diversity of our congregation in the overall leadership and ministry of the church?*”
- “*Right or wrong, we have a reputation for being too ‘button up’ and rigid.*”
- “*I like that we are open minded around issues and allow diversity of thought.*”
- “*Some new members join the church but then disappear.*”
- “*A small group ministry could help us develop closer connections.*”

¹ Susan Beaumont is a nationally respected leader and thinker who specializes in issues of church leadership and governance in large congregations. Interestingly, the foreword to her book was written by our very own Dr. Lewis Galloway.

- “Our youth need consistency in leadership.”
- “The MorningSong worship service is in need of a refresh and retooling.”
- “The church’s leadership of the Faith Initiative to End Childhood Poverty was a big deal and garnered both attention and respect in the community. FPC is going to need to be the leader to get that effort restarted and back on track.”
- “We need an updated procedures manual for staff and officers.”
- “It seems like I only hear from the church when it is asking for money.”
- “There is never a Sunday that I do not marvel at the beauty of the sanctuary and the church grounds.”
- “The same people step up for everything and we end up burning them out.”
- “It is easy to get lost in our church.”
- “Our mission work needs to focus not just on charity but also on meaningful relationship building.”
- “I am always overwhelmed and amazed by the incredible talents, energy, kindnesses, and generosity of our membership.”
- “Not everyone doing the work of the church needs to be serving as an officer.”
- “FPC needs to be bold in using its voice and influence to shape the important conversations happening in our community.”
- “The fellowship and learning opportunities for young adults often seem to be geared primarily towards couples with children. We need to do a better job of also ministering to and including singles and couples without children.”
- “First Presbyterian is home to me.”

General Observations

1. If I were to summarize all of the conversations over the past five months into a single word, it would be: *connection*. We are a church that is yearning for connection at every level – deeper connection with one another, our neighbors, our changing community, our pastors, and most of all our God. Finding ways to connect better – and in some cases re-connect entirely – as a church family must be the driving focus of all our ministry together.
2. There is a genuine spirit of warmth and welcome that permeates FPC. Whether in worship on Sunday mornings or around dinner tables on Wednesday evenings, there is a sense of Christian love and

hospitality in nearly everything we do as a church family. In fact, many new members specifically name the welcoming nature of the church as the primary reason they choose to make FPC their church home.

3. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that the sheer size of the congregation and our physical campus can also present challenges. One visitor used the word “daunting” to describe their experience of navigating our church for the first time.
4. As with every organization the COVID pandemic has presented both unique challenges and opportunities for FPC. Countless people have spoken words of affirmation and appreciation for all the ways the church staff and lay leadership adapted in order to continue safely serving through the worst of the pandemic including high quality worship livestreaming, Zoom Sunday school, outdoor worship opportunities, WAF meals to-go, etc.
5. But these past 2+ years have left others feeling disconnected from their church family. Several people referred to the combined season of pandemic and initial leadership transition as being a period when “the church was closed.” The church, of course, was never *closed* – worship continued to be planned, pastors and staff continued to work remotely and offer care by phone, ministry moved online, etc. Nonetheless, that sense of things being shut down reflects the very real reality that it felt for some as if the church disconnected at a moment when connection is what was most needed.
6. Spartanburg is a rapidly changing community. The downtown corridor is in the midst of a major renaissance and much of the development and population growth is happening in areas and among demographic groups that FPC has not primarily drawn from in its past. It is important for us to take practical steps to ensure that we remain an inviting and hospitable congregation to *all* of our neighbors regardless of age, spiritual background, or geographic location.
7. Worship and music stand at the heart of everything we do as a church family. In the prayers, song, sacraments, and proclamation of

weekly worship we are fed spiritually and sent out to share the Good News with others. The beauty and power of FPC's worship ministry was regularly lifted up in my conversations as being one of the key things that first drew people to the church and continue to keep them engaged. The fact that FPC already has an established tradition of offering both traditional and contemporary style worship every Sunday is also a tremendous strength and worthy of celebration!

8. That said, there is a general lack of coordination and continuity between the traditional and MorningSong services. We need to invest time and energy at both a leadership and congregational level in exploring how and where we can strengthen and better coordinate all of our worship offerings on Sunday mornings.
9. First Presbyterian is a leadership congregation in the community. Our neighbors here in Spartanburg and beyond pay attention to the issues we care about and the places we show up to serve. We are uniquely positioned to make a positive difference by using our voice, energy, and resources to share the love of Jesus Christ with others.
10. We are a "purple church" meaning that we are a body of believers who represent many different theological, political, and socio-economic persuasions. The openness to a diversity of thought and perspectives across our congregation is a rich blessing and true asset. People are hungry for Christian community that allows space for varied opinions and belief sets while seeking to be faithful to the Gospel's call to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.
11. A major challenge over the past decade has been the lack of consistency in the leadership of our children and youth ministries. With the recent hires of Rev. John Daniel DeBevoise and Kara Clark, we are teed up for sustained health and vitality in both of these important ministry areas of the church.
12. FPC is large church that still sometimes operates like a smaller one. This is beautiful in many ways but not necessarily sustainable. We need to begin planning systems that are better suited to the size of our congregation. Some of the "low hanging fruit" in this area include developing an operations manual that coalesces information about staff/lay roles and governance policies into a single document

as well as improving our approach to identifying, welcoming, and then acclimating visitors and new members into the ministry of the church.

13. Stewardship and finances are topics that came up in several conversations. Strong appreciation was voiced for the leadership of Dr. Lewis Galloway and the faithful (and ongoing) work of the Stewardship Committee. For the first time in recent memory, FPC ended the 2021 fiscal year with a \$100k+ budget surplus.
14. Finally, general observations and questions related to the officer nominating process, governance structure, and the size of the session and diaconate were raised in a number of conversations. These are important topics that should be examined closer in coming years.

Conclusion

Key opportunities emerging from these observations include identifying ways to better coordinate our weekly worship offerings, studying our staff and governance structure, addressing navigability issues on our campus through improved signage, and updating our congregational communications platforms. Investing time, money, energy, and prayer in these areas over the next 6-8 months will serve to create a strong foundation for future ministry here at FPC.

Additionally, I envision us pursuing a more thorough long-term strategic planning process in the very near future. That process would ideally be launched sometime in the second half of 2023 or early 2024 and would involve intentional discernment and planning for future mission and ministry across all areas of the church.

First Presbyterian Church is a congregation blessed with a loving staff, sound financial grounding, and a growing congregation of faithful and caring disciples. I am deeply excited for the future ministry in this place and grateful for the opportunity to play a role in shaping it with you.