Strategic Plan for Children and Youth Ministries



Government Street Presbyterian Church
Mobile, Alabama

Introduction

Government Street Presbyterian Church is a vibrant and loving church community in the heart of downtown Mobile, Alabama. For decades, this church has ministered to its community in faithfulness and grace. As an organization and community, this church is facing what many mainline denominations are facing: a shifting cultural landscape that has changed the church and its role in people's lives. What worked for generations for churches now requires some discernment and a new way of being church for its community.



After meeting members and the leadership of GSPC, I am confident that they can overcome any challenge and that their witness to the Gospel, both inside and outside of their walls, is a gift to the kingdom.



Listening Sessions

In service to this project, I met with three groups for listening sessions, met with two elders individually, and interviewed Rev. Lamar. In every case, participants mentioned how important this church was to them and their willingness to do the hard work needed to best serve its members. This is a church that loves and cares for one another, the children and youth in its congregation, and the world around it.

The Church

To help me best understand who Government Street Presbyterian Church is, I asked participants to tell me about the church as a whole. In their own words, they described the church in the following ways:

- This church is a strong community of faith
- It has a deep history of service
- It is a biblically-based church
- The church values traditional worship and music and does both well
- This church has a phenomenal pastor
- There are a lot of people with different views and opinions here, but we are all united together as the church
- This church is a family
- The history of this church is important to me
- The church is steeped in Presbyterian doctrine
- This church is open-minded and inclusive
- This church is intellectually discerning about scripture and we value a learned approach to the Bible
- Our church is very friendly and welcoming
- This church helps me grow spiritually

Children's Ministry at Government Street Presbyterian

The Children's Ministry at GSPC is the stronger of the two when compared to the youth ministry. The Children's Ministry was described as:

- Vibrant, we have children running up and down the aisles of the church
- Our children's time during worship is a time of hope for me, to see all the kids that are here
- We have an amazing nursery and it serves our families well
- Children's Sunday was amazing and the attendance for it was great
- Love that our children read and participate in worship
- Wee Worship is a great success
- We have a really great group of teachers for children's programs on Sunday
- We have a good core group of children who participate in the life of the church
- The kids of the church really love their church
- The children's ministry is pretty healthy, we just need more coordination and communication
- Many love the way the children of the church are incorporated into worship, especially at baptisms
- Vacation Bible School is always a big success

The challenges of the children's ministry are described as follows:

- There is not an intentional focus on fellowship for the younger ages, but I'm not sure if this is something to be concerned about
- Unsure if parents understand the importance of the church in the lives of their children
- Some parental education in terms of how to pass on the faith and the importance of church involvement is needed
- Coordination and communication for volunteers and teachers is really needed and support for them is important

- Worried about high expectations for new DCE hire and wants people to know that the whole church must support the children's ministry.
- One person can't do it all.
- The focus on numbers in terms of kids' (and youth) participation is really not helpful
- There seems to be a lot of anxiety and worry that things "aren't like they used to be." Wishes folks could realize this is a new time for the church.
- The curriculum in the children's ministry is really good, but without a background in education it can be difficult to teach and implement
- We have more kids in Wee Worship than Sunday school and I wonder if more attention should be put there
- A lot of kids go to schools with religious affiliations that have religious events they have to attend (chapel at school as an example) and I wonder how we compete with that

The Children's Ministry is filled with loving teachers and kids excited to be at their church. More support for teachers, education of parents, and parental support will be areas of growth.

Youth Ministry at Government Street Presbyterian

The youth ministry at GSPC is consistently identified as an area of anxiety and worry for this congregation. Declining levels of participation as kids move into the youth program are cited as the primary concern.

The youth ministry does the following well, according to participants:

- The youth Sunday school class is consistently cited as one of the best things this church does for its youth. The commitment of the teachers and the topics studied were widely appreciated. And the kids who come seem to enjoy it.
- Confirmation is a great success and the mentors are deeply appreciated.
- Senior Sunday and youth involvement in worship are appreciated.

The challenges of the youth ministry, however, were detailed:

- We had a really strong youth leader who is no longer with us
- Even planning Senior Sunday is difficult due to families' busy schedules
- There is no youth group at this time
- When there was a youth group it was focused on learning and kids missed out on fellowship and fun
- It can be hard to gain momentum in the youth Sunday school class as kids will come one week and then not the next week or two
- Sunday school has low attendance numbers
- Low participation numbers in all the youth were cited as a problem
- Things just aren't the way they used to be when there were more kids.
- We lose participation as the kids move from children's ministry to youth ministry
- The youth who come to church are not close with one another
- The problems with youth ministry are not new and this has been a problem for at least 8-10 years now
- The church is no longer the only outlet for youth and it is hard to compete with sports, school activities, etc.
- Hiring for a youth ministry position is difficult and it is hard to find continuity even if you can hire for it
- Parents are not committed to getting their kids to church
- Some training on how to reach out to youth would be appreciated--many adults feel out of their depth with youth
- There are no mission opportunities for youth
- You can't even get enough kids together to go to Montreat and those sorts of trips are important
- We don't do a very good job of plugging youth into the life of the church
- Dedicated leadership is needed for youth--to plan, coordinate, and communicate
- We are way too focused on numbers when it comes to youth ministry
- We are way too focused on how we used to do things for youth

- We used to have a thriving Wednesday Night Bible Study but we don't any longer
- There is no place for fellowship and fun for our youth at this time
- Having more adult support for the youth of the church would be great
- We need to do a better job of finding out what a youth's gifts are and helping them use them for the church
- The youth of the church are not plugged into the community around us

I asked participants what success would look like for the youth program. It was a difficult question to answer and I would like to note here two important observations that came up: (1) when asked to describe what works or does not work about the youth ministry, the number of participants was always discussed first and often and (2) there is a deep sense of "we want it to be the way it was." Both of these are understandable, but they are limiting the ability to minister to youth in this new time and context.

Hopes for the Children and Youth of GSPC

I asked participants to dream about what they hoped a youth, going off to college, to have as a result of the church. The answers were:

- I want them to have some familiarity with the Bible
- I want them to have the fellowship of other youth as a resource as they go off into the world
- I want them to be lifelong worshipers
- I want them to learn that faith can help with difficulty. When depression, loneliness, and sadness set in I want them to know the Bible and their faith can help them. I want them to build their soul.
- I want them to know this church is their home. We are always here for them. They can always come back.
- I want them to have a deep sense of God's love
- A strong foundation of faith to help them as they transition into college and its temptations
- I want them to know their beliefs so they won't be easily swayed
- I want them to have strong moral values

- I want them to have a sense of the importance of service and mission as they go out into the world
- I want them to have a sense of self-confidence that comes from their identity as a child of God
- I want them to be comfortable in their faith
- I want them to know and believe the Gospel

The answers to the above questions reveal a church that loves its children and youth and wants for them a life of faith and all that it can offer. This church values Biblical literacy, fellowship, care, and a deep sense of God's love for the children and youth in its care.

Recommendations

In light of the information shared in the listening sessions, I offer the following recommendations for GSPC:

1. Hold a Worship Service at the Start of the School Year in appreciation of children and youth, which marks a shift to a missional focus for the ministries.

The Bridges Transition Model* notes that every transition in the life of an organization consists of three parts: Ending, Neutral Zone, and New Beginning. While this strategic planning is part of the neutral zone, it would be helpful to mark this time of new beginning. An ending also needs to be acknowledged in the life of GSPC as it regards its children and youth ministries. Gone are the days of large numbers of church members, children, and youth who came to church consistently and often, and a church unchallenged by the culture for participants' time and attention.

Instead, it will be helpful to think in terms of mission—the church will now reach out to youth in the midst of their busy lives. As Rev. Lamar notes, the focus needs to be on Christian formation instead of just Christian Education. "Education is primarily programs and head knowledge, while formation is more based on experiences and relationships," Rev. Lamar explains. This service will celebrate a new era of experimentation and relationship-building in reaching out to youth.

*Bridges Transition Model: https://wmbridges.com/about/what-is-transition/

This service of appreciation of children and youth will focus on appreciation of the families of the church, regardless of participation. Each family will be invited to come forward for prayer and the laying on of hands. For those not present, they will be lifted up in prayer.

In appreciating children, youth, and their families in this worship service, a transition will be marked. This service will be as much for the congregation as for the families. It forms this congregation as one that is committed to children and youth.

I would also like to note that GSPC has been struggling with a new vision since the closing of Coffee Club. A focus on children and families, both within and without the church, might be the new vision and direction this congregation needs.

2. On the day of the worship service, hold a parent meeting for any parent with a child or youth in the church. This meeting should focus on:

- The role of parents in faith development
- Resourcing parents with materials that can help them with their own faith life
- Inquiring how the church can best support parents

3. Recruit, train, and assign a mentor to every child on the roll with the hope that the mentor will track with that child as age.

Much like confirmation mentors, mentors will commit to praying for each child/youth, reach out to them monthly in support, and try to invite the child/youth into the life of the church. Mentors will try to invite youth into quarterly mission projects and service within the church.

Support for mentors will be a training session that will orient them to the vision of this program and provide them with tangible ideas for reaching out to youth. The DCE will check in with the mentors periodically to offer them support and prayer.

4. Plan and invite youth to quarterly mission opportunities. This can be done in conjunction with the whole church, but the idea is that once a quarter youth are invited to come and serve in a missional capacity. It can be a service opportunity within the church (train them as ushers and greeters) or a mission to the larger community.

5. Plan and invite youth to a monthly fellowship and fun event. This event exists for the sole purpose of enjoyment. Plan the schedule so that the dates of each event are given to the congregation well in advance. Consider doing the event on the same Sunday of the month: first Sunday fun day, for example. You can ask church members to sign up to design and host one of the fun events.

6. Begin group-building exercises for the fourth and fifth grades. The idea is that by the time the kids transition to youth they are comfortable and committed to one another. As they move into youth group and confirmation, their cohesiveness has been formed from their childhood.

7. Communicate small bible lessons or discussion questions centered around the weekly sermon to youth via text or some other means. The frequency can be determined by staffing ability, but the idea is to generate some sort of faith discussion with youth even if they cannot attend. You can send out links to videos from the Bible Project, the weekly sermon, or similar with a few questions to engage and encourage.

8. Communicate with and support the children and youth ministry volunteers. Send out a weekly email to volunteers that offers encouragement, guidance, and support for their particular role. Once a month I recommend contacting each volunteer personally to gather any prayer requests they might have personally, check in on how they are doing in their role, and offer thanks.

9. Communicate with families regularly and through a variety of methods. Communicate through multiple channels the events and programs of the church. Communication must be often and consistent. Schedule a time to personally check in with each family quarterly if possible. Not only do you want to relay information, but you want to care for them personally.

Suggestions for Implementation of Recommendations:

A few suggestions related to these recommendations:

- Remember, not everything has to be done at once. It is better to go slowly and make the changes well than a rush to implement them all at once.
- Begin with the youth program since it needs the most attention. You can start by asking confirmation mentors to continue on as mentors for their youth.
- Set longer goals for things that involve the children's ministry.
- Dates and specific goal setting can be set by the Christian Education committee and should include a timeline for implementation and a timeline for evaluating the changes made. But remember, this is an organizational shift for the church, and those take time.

Final Thoughts

It has been an honor to get to know the faithful and committed folks of Government Street Presbyterian Church. This congregation loves the children and youth in its community and seeks to serve the world outside the church's doors, too. While undergoing change is never easy and can elicit all sorts of feelings, I look forward to what this church can do with those in its care long into the future.

As per our agreement, I am available to help with this process in any capacity you would like in the next six months. It is an honor to serve GSPC any way I can.

Demographics 2014-2022

Year	Membership	Children on Roll infant-5th grade	Youth on Roll 6th-12th grade
2014	422	73	47
2015	427	70	50
2016	398	68	49
2017	385	67	50
2018	364	66	38
2019	356	50	35
2020	358	No report	No report
2021	355	86	81
2022	355	29	35



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