



# Fulfilling God's Promise

## FVPC's Vibrant Ministry Plan 2020-2025

Report from Interviews and Focus Groups &  
Ministry Plan Initiatives  
December 17, 2019

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# Our Planning Journey

Throughout its history, God has remained faithful to FVPC, and the people of FVPC have responded in kind. This faithfulness has been evident in the last decade, as we expanded our physical plant and navigated our way through pastoral transitions with an eye on growing our ministries and impact throughout the Fox Valley.

Desiring to extend our faithfulness to God, in August of 2019, we embarked on a discernment and strategic planning process to address the question, *What is God calling us to be and to do in the next five years as the Body of Christ in the Fox Valley – with our mission, our ministry, and our finances?*

The purpose of the process is to provide guidance to session for how we as a church can best meet God's call to service, address our short and long-term budget challenges, and provide direction for a dynamic and sustainable future. The process included:

- Holding three Sunday morning focus groups with members of the congregation.
- Conducting 143 individual interviews.
- Meeting with church committees to understand their unique perspectives.
- Conducting extensive short and long-term budget analysis.
- Throughout, we dedicated ourselves to prayer with weekly scripture and prayer guides.

On Saturday, October 12, we held a strategic planning retreat with 30 people, including members of the strategic planning team, interviewers, pastoral staff, deacons, and session members. We identified what enables FVPC to thrive when it is at its best and what key ministry areas we feel God is calling us to for 2020-2025. The "Insights & Inspiration" (pp. 3-20) section of this report includes the analysis of data from interviews and focus groups that retreat participants used in their discernment. The Vibrant Ministry Plan that follows (pp. 21-29) is based on the recommendations formed by retreat participants and clarified by session, deacons, relevant committees, and staff. The Strategic Planning Team will seek session approval of the plan on December 17, 2019 and, if approved, will present it to the congregation on Sunday, January 26, 2020.

The session will name an implementation team to track progress on Vibrant Ministry Plan according to an implementation schedule recommended by pastoral staff. Additionally, pastoral staff, the communication team, and church committees will work together to create a worship and communications plan related to the Vibrant Ministry Plan as a way of continuously promoting it and linking it to the core mission of our church.

# Insights & Inspiration

In the focus groups, committee meetings, and interviews, we several asked questions, including: (1) what attracted you to FVPC, (2) what have been high point experiences for you, (3) what are your hopes and dreams for the future, (4) what specific ministry opportunities do you feel God may be calling us to pursue, and (5) how might we ensure the short and long-term financial health of FVPC?

In the following sections, we consider each of these questions, sharing insights gained from our listening process. We have combined responses to questions in 1&2 and 3&4 together due to significant areas of overlap.

## What Enables FVPC to Thrive?

Our first two questions focused on what attracted you to FVPC and what have been high point experiences for you. Together they illustrate what enables FVPC to thrive when it is at its best. Many themes emerged, but eight stood out as especially important for people.

1. Meaningful Relationships, Fellowship, and Caring Community (mentioned 133 times)
2. Great Children and Youth Ministries (mentioned 126 times)
3. Great Worship and Relevant Presbyterian Theology (mentioned 122 times)
4. Welcoming Atmosphere and Good First Impressions (mentioned 98 times)
5. Strong Connected Pastoral Leadership (mentioned 95 times)
6. Mission, Serving Others, and Community Engagement (mentioned 94 times)
7. Many Opportunities for Involvement Congregational Life (mentioned 77 times)
8. Adult Christian Education and Spiritual Growth (mentioned 52 times)

*Note: Quotes provided below may be either a direct quote or a paraphrase of the interviewee's comments.*

- **Meaningful Relationships, Fun, Fellowship, & Caring Community:** Many people talked about the meaningful relationships they have developed with other members of FVPC and how those relationships, in many cases, have turned into enduring friendships. They talked about how much they enjoyed getting together with other members of FVPC for

fun activities and fellowship events – such as book and Bible studies, service projects, movie nights, silent auctions, chili cook-offs, golf outings, trivia nights, etc. – and how important these relationships and events have been in helping them deepen their faith, experience joy, and feel supported by a Christian community. Others talked about much they have appreciated the thoughtfulness and care of other members of the congregation in times of need such as illness, injury, job loss, depression, loss of loved ones, or thoughtfulness toward children with special needs. They talked about the importance of personal touch, including cards, flowers, visits, and Stephen Ministry. Still others talked about how much they valued the multi-generational relationships at FVPC:

- “For us, the lowest points in our lives were also the highest points for us at FVPC: when my mom was in the hospital and when our son passed away. The head pastor immediately reached out, and the church family showed a great outpouring of compassion.”
  - “I joined a women’s group but didn’t have a ride. Another member of the group regularly picked me up, and we created a lasting and meaningful relationship.”
  - “The love of this church always comes through when I spend time with its members.”
  - “When I lost my job, a fellow member called and got me out of the house. Sometimes we would get coffee and other times we would just walk. Sometimes we talked about jobs, sometimes we talked about other stuff. The Christian support and fellowship carried me through this dark time.”
- ***Great Children and Youth Ministries:*** Our ministry to children and youth also emerged as a high point experience. Investment beyond Sunday morning was of special importance, including the Christmas pageant, work with World Relief, high school Go n’ Serve mission trips, FOTC, youth retreats, and Aaron’s leadership.
    - “As a mother of young children, my entire time at FVPC I have most enjoyed witnessing the children finding their place in our church and growing in their faith. I especially love our choirs, soloists, the Christmas Eve service, and the senior homilies.”
    - “Kids can flourish here. The community always makes a place for our children, even when they are squirmy in the service.”

- “One of the things that initially drew our family to FVPC was the large number of children during the service’s time for children, and the fact that children were waving to older members of the congregation as they came forward – a sign of meaningful intergenerational connections.”
- “We came to FVPC because of location and for the youth group. When I worked with the youth, I saw God. During Go n’ Serve trips, retreats, etc., I saw kids able to open up in a safe space and stepping outside their comfort zone. Some of those kids, I don’t know where they would be today if they hadn’t had that safe space.”
- “A high point for me was taking our kids on a Go n’ Serve trip. What made the trip so impactful was the great group of adults who were engaged with the kids at that time, adults that I knew would be there for my kids in the future.”
- A real closeness among peers was achieved at a recent youth retreat and that made a lasting impression. – Youth Member
- ***Great Worship & Relevant Presbyterian Theology:*** Many aspects of our worship were mentioned as high point experiences, including the preaching, the quality of the music, special services like Christmas Eve, the denominational background, and the traditional worship style. Some mentioned appreciation for the familiarity they have with the worship approach; others mentioned appreciation of theology and preaching that is relevant and addresses current issues.
  - “I recall Carl teaching that attending church is not just for the person attending, but for others as well, and that it’s hard to tell the impact each person’s presence has on others. I cried to ‘Here I Am Lord’ multiple times.”
  - “Worship is what draws me to FVPC. I enjoy the challenge of the sermons.”
  - “There is great preaching that leaves me feeling fulfilled.”
  - “The social justice awareness and discussions are strong; I’m impressed at the way the church talked about people – all people – as loved creatures of God.”
  - “I’m very proud of FVPC’s sense of community; that is what keeps me involved...to be together with people to worship and serve God.”

- “Music has always been a highlight of my worship experience; it’s when I feel closest to God, as I’m communing with Him in prayer. Even though I can’t be a regular member of the chancel choir, I’ve been welcomed when I have been able to participate. FVPC is fortunate to have so many talented musicians who give of their time to elevate worship.”
- **Welcoming Atmosphere and Good First Impressions:** We heard many stories about the sense of welcome and belonging people felt as they first came to FVPC and how this hospitality and support continued as they stayed. The Bread Brigade, along with the welcoming actions of the pastors and members of the congregation were mentioned frequently. Some said they appreciated the non-judgmental attitude of the congregation.

Related to the theme of Welcoming Atmosphere & Good First Impressions is the idea that “early integration” into the life of the church made people feel like they belong. Interviewees mentioned invitations to join the Dorcas Circle or participate in Community Dinners. Some stressed the importance of being asked or invited: without that outreach, the newcomer might have stayed on the sidelines.

- “FVPC is authentic and not flashy, and that is a draw. A very positive and welcoming community.”
- “When we began searching for a church in the Fox Valley, we were impressed by the friendliness of FVPC (and by the bread delivered to our front door). On the second or third visit, John Gerlach really impressed us by remembering our names! We felt welcomed.”
- “A loaf of bread was delivered to our house, practically before we changed out of our church clothes.”
- “During one of my earliest Sundays at FVPC, I happened to talk to Paul Olney. A few days later he texted me and invited me to a Wednesday night men’s gathering at a local pub, and it just made me feel so included and welcome, just as I am.”
- **Strong Connected Pastoral Leadership:** Many people talked about how much they valued and appreciated relationships and personal connections with pastoral staff.

Some talked about pastoral staff spending time with them and caring for them during difficult times such as the loss of a loved one, illness, divorce, unemployment, or questioning their faith. Others mentioned how much they appreciate it when they get a personal note of thanks or pastors stop by to say thank you when they are volunteering at an event such as the Community Dinner, service projects, Vacation Bible School, or serving food at a funeral. Others said they like it when pastors take the initiative to talk with them individually and learn about their families, interests, hobbies, and exciting times in their life such as travels and vacations.

- “One of the pastors did our daughter’s wedding ceremony. The message was so personal that others commented on its beauty. I felt proud to belong to a church where the pastors were so connected with its members.”
- “I have high praise for Melinda, especially for her work keeping the church on track during the interim after Carl’s retirement. I can also relate very easily with Michelle. She’s super friendly and has a great sense of humor.”
- “Aaron has advanced the children’s programs. He is very cool in dealing with the kids and I am particularly fond of his preaching.”
- “I love it when close, personal relationships exist between pastors and members of the congregation.”
- I so appreciate my one-on-ones with Stephanie. She really listens and has helped me deepen my faith.”
- “The compassion of the ministers is vital to the future of the church.”

People also talked about how FVPC is at its best when pastoral leadership provides excellent preaching, teaching, and spiritual development of the congregation and is active in helping to organize fellowship events and create opportunities for involvement that help people feel connected to them, to one another, and to the church. Others talked about how much they valued having women in leadership roles and having pastoral leadership that is brave, exciting, balanced in viewpoints, and fiscally responsible.

- “I love Stephanie’s sermons. She translates the scriptures into practical challenges and specific ways that we need to be doing God’s work.”
- “I was raised Catholic and was impressed that females could be ordained. Betsy Rice was the youth pastor at the time we came to the church, and I was excited for our daughter to have strong female role models amongst the pastoral staff.”
- “Our current leadership is exciting; it helps me rejuvenate my faith to discern how to live out my faith in my daily life.”
- **Mission, Serving Others, & Community Engagement:** Many people talked about their appreciation for FVPC’s involvement in mission work and service activities such as Lazarus House, Rebuilding Aurora, Adult Go n’ Serve, Friday Night Dinners, and Living Waters for the World. They also talked about how personal involvement in these activities was meaningful for them as a way to express and deepen their faith and as a way to meet and get to know other members of the congregation. Multi-generational mission days and community dinners were especially appreciated as an opportunity to interact with one another.
  - “The whole church service project gave us that ‘wow’ feeling. It was a wonderful way to do something good in an accessible way and to feel involved and invested in the church family. We’d be eager to participate again.”

In addition to service to others, interviewees also spoke of FVPC’s engagement in the broader community, including participating in rummage sales, Katrina Relief, Black Arts Festival, and more.

- “We are always being encouraged to be involved in our community.”
- **Opportunities for Involvement in Congregational Life:** Many interviewees referenced the importance of lay leadership at FVPC and how much they appreciate opportunities to contribute and provide leadership by getting involved in the various church ministries. Others mentioned how committed the congregation has been to stepping up when needed, including supporting Katrina relief and capital campaigns. Finally, some commented that leadership within the congregation is part of spiritual development, as it can rejuvenate faith.



- “We were welcomed right away and invited to help with Sunday school and then the children’s library.”
- “I was particularly impressed with the esprit de corps of members who volunteered for painting jobs finishing up our recent remodeling project. I enjoyed the experience of working with other members in the common goal of finishing that project.”
- “I liked that I spent so much time at church that my kids ran around and felt at home.”
- “Anyone can go to a church to worship, but providing the opportunity to get involved in activities that brings them closer to the church family is critical.”
- “When I was new to the church, someone asked me if I would be interested in helping with the community dinners. I openly admitted to her that I can’t cook. She explained there were a lot of ways I could help and she and others would show me what to do. I went the afternoon before and helped with preparation. I learned how to do several things that I didn’t know how to do, I had fun, I spent time with other ladies from the church and felt as though I was doing something useful and helping others.”
- **Adult Christian Education and Spiritual Growth:** Many people talked about the importance to their faith journey and Christian education opportunities FVPC such as book and Bible studies, support groups, and the many rich and dynamic offerings available during the Sunday morning Christian Education Hour.
  - “Adult education is current and relevant; I enjoy it and want it to remain that way.”
  - “I especially appreciated the self-discernment aspect of the adult education programs. And I really appreciated the close relationships with other members supporting me in daily life.”
  - “This congregation made me realize how close I am to God and I felt that God was leading me to be active in a congregation, which I love. I love the people and have many friends in the congregation. The church is a calm place in a chaotic world.”

## Images of the Future & Specific Ministry Opportunities

Next, we asked people to share their vision for the future of FVPC, a future of vibrant ministry within the walls of FVPC and in the broader community. These broad visions prompted ideas for specific ministry opportunities – ways of extending God’s love in our congregation and our world. We collected hundreds of ideas, many shared by multiple individuals. Powerful visions of a connected and engaged congregation emerged. Specifically, many people shared the following visions and specific opportunities:

1. Involvement in Mission & Service to the Community (mentioned 138 times)
  2. Engaging Members in Fellowship, Ministry & Leadership (mentioned 88 times)
  3. Energetic Children & Youth Ministries (mentioned 64 times)
  4. Better Marketing, Communications, & Community Presence to Grow the Congregation (mentioned 62 times)
  5. Providing Care to Members of the Congregation (mentioned 56 times)
  6. Strong Relationships with Pastoral Staff (mentioned 53 times)
  7. Vibrant Worship and Preaching (mentioned 52 times)
  8. More Diversity in the Congregation (mentioned 48 times)
- ***Involvement in Mission & Service to the Community:*** It’s clear that the people of FVPC feel that a big part of the church’s mission is to serve others. Relatedly, interviewees want the congregation to play an important and visible role in the local community. As one person said, “I would love the community to say, ‘Yep, there is that church doing that thing again.’”

While a variety of opinions exist about mission and service to the community, some patterns emerged in the data. People appreciate our local, national, and global focus, but the majority want more local opportunities including the possibility of a new “signature” local mission project. People also recognize that the congregation is pulled in a lot of different directions, in terms of missions; there is a call to evaluate the current service projects to find the best-aligned opportunities, then eliminate others. “Do a few things well rather than many things poorly,” one interviewee noted.

Interviewees also called for new formats of service that can engage more people including children and those who work. One person suggested connecting service opportunities to Sunday morning messages, for example as part of the liturgical calendar, to help create further meaning and learning.

In terms of specific ideas for ministry opportunities or growing community relationships, recommendations include:

- Ministries for families with special needs

- Family and multi-generational mission projects
- “Done in a day” service projects for adults
- Service weekends
- Adult mission projects
- More work with South Shore Drill Team, Growing Place Preschool, Rebuild Aurora, Lazarus House, Moms Demand Action, Youth at Risk, local boys school, Hessed House, Habitat for Humanity, Feed My Starving Children
- Ministry to families of Harrison Street Elementary School
- Create backpacks for kids in need
- Rummage sale to support missions
- Ministry to the homeless
- Varying views on Living Waters for the World, most want to continue or expand, others think it may be time to look for other opportunities
- Address substance abuse problems in community
- Have programs that respond to national emergencies
- Start a food pantry or address root causes of hunger
- Focus on affordable housing
- Healthcare-based service opportunities
- Open the church for more groups to use, like AA or Boy Scouts
- Address the fears that keep people from having a close relationship with Jesus and the changing community
- Continue the Community dinners

Three significant subcategories emerged within mission and service to the community:

- ***Ministry To and With Fruto de Vida, Latinx Community (mentioned 15 times):*** Many were thankful for the existing partnership with Fruto de Vida and recognized that expanding this relationship may give us new opportunities to learn, serve, and advocate. No specific suggestions were offered, but several interviewees said Fruto de Vida was just one opportunity to be in dialogue with the Fox Valley’s growing Latinx community.
- ***Social Justice & Advocacy (mentioned 12 times):*** Others spoke of their desire to engage with social justice and advocacy work, as a means of mission and service. Specific suggestions include:
  - Addressing root causes of societal problems, not just symptoms (e.g., taking a public stand against inequality, racism, etc.)
  - Peace keeping and reconciliation

- Continue anti-racism work, becoming familiar with other cultures
  - **Greening, Sustainability (mentioned 7 times):** Still others encouraged the church to engage in more environmental sustainability and stewardship activities. This is both internally focused (greening our church building and grounds) and external (as an opportunity for service). Specific opportunities include:
    - Foster green/sustainable practices
    - Be an eco-leader for environmental justice and advocacy in our community
    - Conduct an eco-audit of the church facilities
- **Engaging Members in Fellowship, Ministry & Leadership:** Many dreams and opportunities centered around the creation of an engaged and thriving church community, where members and attendees turn for fun, fellowship, spiritual growth, and opportunities to get involved, serve and provide leadership within the congregation. Interviewees envision a community of rich, lifelong friendships, where relationships are nurtured – a place where the fellowship is “indescribably vital and you can feel the energy in everything we do.” Specific ideas include:
  - Increase participation in leadership and involvement
  - Early engagement of newcomers
  - Make sure existing members feel comfortable and connected
  - Nurture friendships/groups of friends within the church
  - Mentorship program for new families, etc.
  - Fellowship for parents during children and youth activities
  - Multi-generational activities
  - Family camp and other family activities
  - Trips to the Holy Land and Scotland like Gavin used to do
  - Lots and lots of small groups
  - Fellowship and social opportunities for adults, including time with pastors
  - Engage 21-35 year-olds
  - Inclusion of special needs community, caregivers, seniors
  - Create a group for the newly retired
  - Unplug and connect! Encourage people to interact without devices
  - Look for opportunities to bond over shared activities (one suggestion: quilting)
  - Dynamic programs and classes for adults during Christian Ed hour, more adult education opportunities
  - Expanding discussions about personal faith

- Use technology to “bring in” speakers
  - Make the church a place to address concerns of daily life across experiences and stages: finances, raising kids, senior issues
- ***Energetic Children and Youth Ministries:*** The current children and youth ministries are already strong, and people want to sustain this and grow it as a way to care for our kids and the future of the Church. People dreamed of a day when 100 children would pour forward for children’s time, and when more ministries would be available, conducted by well-trained children and youth leaders. Specific recommendations include:
    - Year-round Sunday school
    - Strong VBS
    - Ecumenical youth groups
    - Youth worship leaders
    - Community center/coffee shop and social worker for youth
    - Facility/gym to host community sports events and where kids can come hang out
    - Inspire, and possibly incentivize, young people to volunteer
    - Family and inter-generational service projects
    - Whole-family activities beyond missions/service work
    - Continue current outreach, including Kids New Members class
    - Interact more with Growing Place preschool families
    - Ministry to families of Harrison Street Elementary School
    - Children singing in services more, a choir for middle school students
    - Showcasing of youth talent
    - Praise and worship “concert” once a month, possibly led by a youth band
    - Consider service times to accommodate Sunday morning sports activities: Saturday services, swap Adult Ed Hour and second service
    - Heavier involvement with groups like Youth at Risk
- ***Better Marketing, Communications, & Community Presence to Grow the Congregation:*** Many believe that FVPC is a “hidden gem” or a “best kept secret.” They long to increase the church’s visibility through better marketing, communications, signage, and involvement in the community. The goal of this, as one interviewee explained, is to “be a well-known church. A community leader where people are both involved and served.” Visions of the future include a congregation that is growing and where there is a buzz of energy and excitement. Specific suggestions include:
    - Better and more communication about the church internally and externally
    - Better public signage
    - More Social media

- Pastors and members do more outreach
  - Offer short devotions at community events, like road races
  - Increased church visibility such as worship services in a park
  - Submit stories about church to newspaper
  - Wear matching T-shirts at parades
  - Sister congregation in Tri-Cities area to draw more people to the Presbyterian church
  - Encourage people to invite friends to church
  - Host community conversations and learning opportunities such as talks about current issues
  - Keep up with technology
  - Continue live-casting services
  - Survey new members and attendees to learn where they want to be involved
  - Clean, bright building that is welcoming
  - Programming for young adults (20-35)
- ***Providing Care to Members of the Congregation:*** While fellowship and Christian education activities for adults are vital, many people mentioned the importance of ministries to care for the members of the congregation as an essential part of creating a connected and engaged church. Stephen Ministries was mentioned frequently as an exemplar that needs to be continued and valued. Other specific recommendations include:
    - More ministries for seniors
    - Create a group for people undergoing big shifts in their spiritual growth
    - Grow mentoring opportunities for children, couples, and others
    - Have kids make cards for the elderly and sick in the congregation
    - A circle for working mothers, with a schedule that fits busy lives
    - Host and promote men's and women's Bible studies
    - Watch for people going through life transitions, such as a divorce, unemployment, and death of loved ones, and make a special effort to reach out
    - Better care for those who are especially active in the church, to prevent burnout
- ***Strong Relationships with Pastoral Staff:*** Many people mentioned a desire for strong and personal relationship with the pastors, especially now that the church is fully staffed. They also mentioned the important role the pastoral staff plays in setting the vision with the congregation, maintaining a positive culture in the church, and caring for the congregation. Specific visions and opportunities include:
    - Pastors connect with all members and build relationships
    - Pastors work across perceived differences to witness to the possibility of unity

- Pastors teach and model how to disagree (especially politically) without becoming divided
  - Pastor diversity in terms of years
  - Members reach out to pastors and build relationships with them
  - Pastors feel supported by the congregation
  - Church determines pastoral roles based on “what should we be doing?” rather than the structure we currently have
  - Nimble decision making
  - Diverse thinkers in decision making bodies
  - More 1:1 congregational care done by pastors
  - Coordination with other area churches – re-establishing the ministerium
  - Pastors spend less time away from FVPC (e.g., on activities with the broader denomination)
  - Pastors share experiences they have outside of the church (at conferences, in mission work, etc.)
  - One pastor is always in town and available [note: this is currently done]
- ***Vibrant Worship and Preaching:*** Visions for the future included sustaining and expanding FVPC’s already dynamic Sunday morning worship services, but there were differences of opinion about how best to do this. Some love the familiarity of traditional worship and singing hymns, while others would like more contemporary worship and music, and still others would like a blend. Likewise, some want sermons that focus on knowing and loving God, experiencing the love of Jesus Christ, or deepening faith, while others are inspired by sermons that address current issues. We share some of these different perspectives below. All come from the same desire to, as one interviewee said, “make church so great you never want to miss a Sunday.”
    - Sermons are Biblically based, focused on God, Christ, morals, values, with meaningful prayers
    - Sermons that address current issues in the world and challenge our comfort zone
    - Less politics in the pulpit
    - Make sure Sunday morning services offer ideas for practical application of Scriptural precepts to our lives
    - Balance social justice messaging with teaching around spiritual growth
    - More diverse, vibrant, contemporary music: hands raised in praise, screens, engaged in worship not holding a hymnal
    - Keep things the same, “don’t want a mega church with power point, a rock band, and a pastor in jeans”

- Full choir at all services
  - Youth worship leaders
  - Praise & worship concerts once a month
  - Contemporary service added
- ***More Diversity in Terms of Age, Race, Ethnicity, Single/Married, Children/No Children:***  
 Interviewees envision a church where true diversity and inclusion is possible. They want multi-generational relationships and presence, and a welcoming spirit that makes all feel at home, regardless of age, race, ethnicity, marital status, sexual orientation, or children or no-children. The desire is “to become known in the community as a place that is inclusive.” Specific ideas for creating and extending a diverse, inclusive, and welcoming congregation include:
    - Ministries for families with special needs members
    - Ministries for seniors
    - Continue anti-racism work by increasing familiarity with other cultures
    - Cross-economic and cross-cultural interaction and awareness
    - Strengthen relationship with Fruto de Vida
    - Peace keeping and reconciliation work
    - Educate children about diversity
    - Help all leaders be sensitive to inclusion and aware of potential alienation
    - Accepting to gender/identity/sexuality

## Supporting our Financial Health

Our final question addressed an important area of need, our congregation’s long-term financial health. Attending to our financial wellbeing enables all our other work; increased stability increases the foundation from which we can serve locally and globally. Ideas for addressing our financial health revolved around eight clusters of ideas:

1. Grow Membership through Better Communication & Community Involvement (mentioned 53 times)
2. Clear & Transparent Communication about the Budget (mentioned 43 times)
3. Fiscal Discipline (mentioned 43 times)
4. Shift Capital Campaign Pledges to Operating Budget in 2021 (mentioned 26 times)
5. Experiment with New Approaches to Stewardship (mentioned 25 times)
6. The Role of Pastoral Staff (mentioned 19 times)
7. Specific Fundraising Ideas (mentioned 15 times)
8. Use More Volunteers for Things We Hire Out (mentioned 9 times)



- **Grow Membership through Better Communication & Community Involvement:** While many recognize that church membership is declining nationally, they also note that the Fox Valley is still a growing and dynamic area. Attracting new members allows more people to come to faith and grow in their faith, strengthens FVPC and a vibrant Christian community, and broadens our financial base. One interviewee said, “The best shot is to be a church that people want to join.” Several ideas for attracting new members are mentioned in the section on Marketing, Communication, and Community Presence in the previous section of this report, but here we share few additional ideas that speak to the financial and operational life of the congregation:
  - Grow membership/hope new staff bring in new members; full staff to reduce some leadership fatigue, give support to church leaders
  - Communications committee gets our name out in community
  - Special events/fundraisers to draw in community, e.g., multi-church quarterly concerts (potentially charge entry and pass plate during event) - enhances community awareness, fosters community, and shares proceeds/burden of coordination.
  - Events (e.g. concerts/festivals) to bring exposure within the community.
  - Focus on youth ministry to bring in younger families.
  - Community outreach, speaking up about important issues will draw in new members (e.g., teacher strike) - change will attract new members
  - Mission involvement will bring young adults/young families
  - Our "community" needs to be seen as greater tri cities area/Elburn/Batavia/ Elgin
  - March in parades for exposure
  - FVPC T-Shirts
  - Car window stickers
  - Reversing downward spiral of membership before it starts should be session top priority
  - Reach out to members who are not involved and get feedback
  - Keep the members we have: special outreach to those who might leave
  
- **Clear & Transparent Communication about the Budget:** Some wondered, “Are we a financially literate church?” Unable to answer this with confidence, interviewees spoke about the need to understand how the church’s finances work, and to improve or extend communication around the current and future financial state. One respondent noted that in the past, when financial challenges were made clear to the congregation, the people have “risen up and provided the funds that were needed.” Financial transparency inspires generosity. The following specific recommendations emerged about how to communicate:

- Open forums for better communication and Q&A as part of the strategic planning process
  - Ask for help in a direct way; tell us what you need
  - Breakdown what pledge increases look like per day/week/month
  - Regular pledge updates during annual campaign
  - Revamp quarterly updates (hard to understand)
  - Communicate how fundraising efforts are succeeding and distributed into expenses
  - Communicate/remind the congregation that a decision was made to be fully staffed as a way to grow our church and our ministries – now we need to fund it
  - Communication about how shortfalls impact programming (positive version of this: what our money does, how it impacts community, furthers our mission)
  - Message financial giving within one's ability – invitation, not pressure
  - Testimonies about tithing or giving
  - Stewardship Committee follow up with people about giving
- ***Fiscal Discipline:*** A number of people mentioned the need for fiscal discipline to create and maintain a balanced budget and support short and long-term financial health. Several ideas emerged:
    - Capital debt paid off/no more debt
    - Be willing to cut, including staff cuts; keep income and expenses as close as possible while paying debt
    - Focus on quality programming, being good stewards of what we have, keep commitments
    - Free up money channels, more control on extra-budget spending when budget needs exist
    - Budget should be a 2-year process
    - Don't go into debt – ever; no deficit budgets, ever
    - More session oversight of committee spending/expenses
    - Mission spending out of budget, rely on income generated to fund missions
    - Do NOT cut salaries to balance budget
    - Choose Mission over full staffing
    - Form a finance committee to ensure a balanced budget every year
- ***Challenge the Congregation to Increase Giving to the Operations Budget When the Capital Campaign Concludes in 2021:*** Many people suggested that once the capital campaign concludes in June 2021, we should invite and challenge ourselves as a congregation to dedicate a percentage of what we were giving in the capital campaign to operating budget. Our average giving to the capital campaign has been \$379k each year since 2012.

- **Experiment with New Approaches to Stewardship:** Interviewees suggested a number of creative opportunities for the annual stewardship campaign. These ideas include:
  - Look at the possibility to utilize capital campaign model for stewardship campaigns and the operating budget
  - Stewardship/financial education (about the spiritual practice, not just give us your money) in generation-appropriate ways
  - Develop wills emphasis/estate gifts program; educate the congregation on legacy giving
  - Budget should be a 2-year process
  - Adult Book Study on "Not Your Parents Offering Plate"
  - Donor "care" - maintaining relationships keeps people connected and feeling like they belong
  - Testimonies about tithing/giving
  - Targeted messages to different groups of givers
  - Get expert financial advice
  - Financial education with session
  - Stewardship campaign moved up
  - On-line giving [note: we have this, but very few people use it, and it currently costs about \$4k per year to subscribe]
  
- **The Role of Pastoral Staff:** There were a variety of perspectives on the role pastoral staff should play in stewardship and the budget, including:
  - Give staff financial room to make changes and try new things
  - Remind the congregation that we have only been fully staffed for less than a year after eight years of cobbling things together – give them time to gain momentum
  - Pastoral staff should be more involved in stewardship campaign
  - Have pastors offer stewardship/financial education (about the spiritual practice, not just give us your money) in generation-appropriate ways
  - Reach out to members who are not involved and get feedback for why they have disengaged
  - Personal calls to first time pledgers/givers to thank
  - Less politics from the pulpit, which seems to be driving some people away, including strong givers
  - One opportunity for savings is, wherever possible, to have only one pastor on a trip; traveling together is costly
  - Do not pay for substitutes when we are fully staffed [note: this has not been done since before we were fully staffed]

- **Specific Fundraising Ideas:** This question also produced several suggestions for fundraising events or activities. Suggestions included:
  - “All hands on deck” big fundraiser(s)
  - Friday Night Coffee Shop/Entertainment Fundraiser
  - Solicit grants/donations from organizations
  - T-Shirt design and sell
  - Car window stickers
  - Fundraising activities - instead of one big campaign, lots of smaller fundraisers
  - Rent out space in building
  - Afternoon preschool
  - Corporate Sponsors-LWW & SSDT
  - Encourage youth to give
  - Sell shares in specific ministries
  - Grant availability for specific projects
  
- **Use More Volunteers for Things We Hire Out:** Recognizing FVPC’s long-history of volunteer-led activities, interviewees wondered if some services we currently outsource could be accomplished through volunteer help. Related comments include:
  - Create (volunteer or paid) volunteer coordinator position to make volunteering easier, care for volunteers, etc.
  - If people can't give money, encourage them to give time - time is money
  - Engagement and involvement leads to ownership and support - make volunteering easier with smaller, specific commitments

# Ministry Plan Details

During the October 12 planning retreat, we spent the bulk of the day working on vision statements and top recommendations for the future in six of the eight key ministry areas described above (2&3 and 4&5 were combined):

1. Involvement in Mission & Service to the Community
2. Engaging Members in Fellowship, Ministry & Leadership
3. Better Marketing, Communications, & Community Presence to Grow the Congregation
4. Providing Care to Members of the Congregation
5. Strong Relationships with Pastoral Staff
6. Vibrant Worship and Preaching

On October 15 and October 30, the strategic planning team met to consolidate and refine the results of the planning retreat and to prepare them to go to church committees for further development. In November the church committees reviewed the recommendations from the point of view of their committee and provided suggestions for revision as well as input about the timing of planning and implementation. The strategic planning team and staff worked with the suggested revisions to craft the Vibrant Ministry Plan below.

The Energetic Children & Youth Ministry area was not addressed at the planning retreat because the key staff member for that ministry was not able to be present. Those committees provided materials from their own planning and discernment processes that were reviewed in light of interview and focus group data. They are included as submitted by the church committees.

The topic of Strengthening Diversity & Inclusion in the Congregation was also held to the side at the planning retreat. It is an important ministry area and will be explored more fully by pastoral staff and the congregation going forward. As a congregation, we are committed to attending to diversity in all its forms, including race, ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, family and marital status, age, ability, and more.

## Involvement in Mission & Service to the Community

### **Vision Statement**

FVPC, grounded and guided by our discipleship in Jesus Christ, proclaim our transformative call to serve each other and the world. We live out this call through our active responses to all of God's people, regardless of age, gender, race, citizenship, sexuality, and ability.

### **Our Recommendations Are**

1. Join with church and community partners in justice, advocacy, and care work alongside the LGBTQIA community. (Mission/Michelle)
2. Increase our care of creation by working with Presbyterians for Earth Care or other appropriate faith-based organization to become Earth Care certified (or equivalent). (Mission/Michelle)
3. Partner with Harrison Street School on issues like housing, food, tutoring, advocacy for immigrants. (Mission/Michelle)
4. Become more involved in responding to local, national, and international crises, human-made or natural disasters, mental health crises, violence or terrorism, health concerns, etc. and make available resources known. (Mission/Michelle)
5. Intergenerational Mission Trip. (Mission/Michelle)

## Providing Care to Members of the Congregation & Building Strong Relationships with Pastoral Staff

### **Vision Statement**

We provide care for members and pastors of the congregation by being a beacon of God's light, love, and unity through:

- Balanced, God-inspired worship
- Experience of gratitude/celebration/appreciation for people's time, talents, gifts, and service
- Member and pastor care that recognizes our diversity (age, background, economic, racial, sexual orientation, gender identity, political views, etc.) and brings us together while offering opportunities to give and receive caring and support in times of need
- Intergenerational Fellowship

### **Our Recommendations Are**

1. Cultivate a culture of gratitude in the congregation that includes opportunities for members and pastors to offer and receive thanks for gifts of time and talent with a personal touch and in worship, as well as through regular "volunteer spotlights" or notes of thanks in the newsletter (Stewardship & Communication/Stephanie)
2. Leverage our communication tools (currently e-news, Burning Bush, worship bulletins, website, social media) to help church members learn about and from each other. Make Session, Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly news available in our communications. (Communication/Stephanie)
3. Provide excellent pastoral care coordinated by the Head of Staff and supported by staff and church leaders through a "parish and pew" or "shepherding" system. Such a system would assign church leaders to communicate regularly with assigned households in order to help identify care needs and report them to the Head of Staff to support individual pastoral care, congregational care of members, and the formation of support groups as needed. (Personnel/Stephanie)
  - a. Regularly communicate with the congregation regarding church-based care resources, including pastoral visits, home communion, Stephen Ministry, and Angel visitors.
  - b. Regular reminders in church/newsletters to members "If you see something (a pastoral need), say something (to one of the pastors or lay leaders)."
4. Study best practices in supporting healthy pastors and healthy congregations and lead the congregation in conversations and opportunities to put these in place. (Personnel/Stephanie)
5. Create periodic devotionals written by members. (Adult Ministry/Michelle)

Better Marketing, Communications, and Community Presence to  
Grow the Congregation (external focus) &  
Engaging Members in Fellowship and Leadership (internal focus)

**Vision Statement**

FVPC is an engaged, thriving church community where multiple generations are comfortable, connected, and nurtured. The church offers multiple opportunities for community conversation, fellowship, relationship building, and a place to address personal challenges, community needs, and spiritual growth. We support this with powerful and effective communication internally and externally.

**Our Recommendations Are**

1. Use available tools from the county, presbytery, or synod to review a demographic study of our geographic area to discover possibilities for ministry with local 19-30 year-olds (New Member/Michelle) and, as appropriate, develop a strategy for ministering to and with young adults, roughly 19-30 years old, in our Adult Education, fellowship, and/or mission activities. (Adult Ministries/Michelle)
2. Create and implement an external marketing, communications, and community engagement plan, to tell the story of our ministry and mission in our community and invite others to participate with us. (Communications/Stephanie)
3. Create and implement an internal communications plan across all relevant media types and communication opportunities to tell our stories of faith, ministry, and mission to each other in order to help us get to know each other and be aware of opportunities to further our friendships and discipleship. (Communications/Stephanie)
4. Strengthen and extend our welcome ministry in order to offer a warm greeting to newcomers, engage them quickly in the life of the church, and help them make personal connections with members (New Member/Michelle)
5. Build relationships among the whole church family – members, friends, and staff – through intergenerational and age/stage specific fellowship opportunities and groups (Deacons and/or new ministry team/Melinda)
6. Plan events to help members of the congregation and community grow in their knowledge of and engagement with important topics of current interest in church and society (Adult Ministry/Michelle)



## Vibrant Worship & Preaching

### **Vision Statement**

FVPC is a welcoming church that, through God-inspired worship, feeds the heart, mind, and spirit and provides balanced worship services and perspectives to increase spiritual growth, Christian discipleship, and diverse mission opportunities.

### **Our Recommendations Are**

1. Review our overall worship experience with the goal of diversifying the modes and styles of music, ritual, and prayer used to include styles and practices that speak to and aid in the worship of a broader spectrum of our congregation. (Worship/Stephanie)
2. Use worship planning teams to collaborate among worship staff and congregation members to create themes that guide seasons or series of worship and provide input and design leadership on music, artistic elements, and rituals that engage the whole congregation. Surveys of the congregation might be useful to determine what hymns, songs, or topics people are hoping to experience in worship. (Worship/Stephanie)
3. Increase special services at times other than Sunday morning around specific occasions, seasons, or pastoral care needs. (Worship/Stephanie)

# Energetic and Engaging Ministry with Children, Youth and their Families

## **Vision Statement**

Our goal is that everyone, from children and youth to parents and mentors, would experience God's love, grow in their faith and learn how to serve others as they grow into and live out the role of discipleship.

## **Our Recommendations Are**

1. Intergenerational in Key Areas – While age and stage ministries (Sunday School, Youth Groups, etc.) have their place in our congregation, we also want to focus on opportunities that bring all ages together, particularly around service and worship. Continue to offer more opportunities for this faithful engagement throughout the year. (Children & Youth/Aaron)
2. Youthful Leadership in the Congregation – Continue the process of equipping our young people into leadership roles on committees, as elders and deacons, in worship, in youth group settings, and in the wider community. Part of this process is looking at every ministry opportunity and ensuring our youth are present and able to attend (for example, creating a high school group at 9:00AM has encouraged students to attend worship more regularly and creates the possibility of increased worship leadership). It could also include peer-to-peer leadership and mentoring within the middle and high school youth programs. (Youth/Aaron)
3. Engagement with Families beyond Sunday Morning – Create more areas for families to engage in the faith at home and outside of Sunday morning offerings. This may include a focus on families at sporting events, devotions in the home, expanding ministry to include families with babies and toddlers, family picnics and movie nights, board game nights, parent get-togethers, and webinar prayers and worships streamed at home. (Children & Youth/Aaron)
4. Post-High School Ministry – Develop a strategy for ministering to and with recent high school graduates when they are away from FVPC and returning home for visits. (Youth/Aaron)

# Supporting our Financial Health

Our final question addressed an important area of need, our congregation's long-term financial health. Attending to our financial wellbeing enables all our other work; increased stability increases the foundation from which we can serve locally and globally. Ideas for addressing our financial health revolved around eight clusters of ideas:

1. Grow Membership through Better Communication & Community Involvement (mentioned 53 times)
2. Clear & Transparent Communication about the Budget (mentioned 43 times)
3. Fiscal Discipline (mentioned 43 times)
4. Shift Capital Campaign Pledges to Operating Budget in 2021 (mentioned 26 times)
5. Experiment with New Approaches to Stewardship (mentioned 25 times)
6. The Role of Pastoral Staff (mentioned 19 times)
7. Specific Fundraising Ideas (mentioned 15 times)
8. Use More Volunteers for Things We Hire Out (mentioned 9 times)

## Budget Plans and Information

### (Budget Working Group/Session/Stephanie)

In September, Session approved a recommendation from the Stewardship Committee to form a Budget Working Group to be named by Pastor Stephanie. Members included: Pastor Stephanie, Dan DiSanto (Stewardship), Beth Jahoda (Adult Ministries), Jim Ludema, Jill Reilly, and Howard Strong. Based on the work of this group, the Session is committed to the following goals and principles in its role as the steward of the church financial resources.

1. A 2020 budget with a deficit of no more than \$50,000.
2. To eliminate the \$50,000 deficit, we would need to increase pledge income by 10-15%, or on average \$400 per pledging household in 2020.
3. Commitment to returning to balanced budgets in 2021 and beyond.
4. Formation of a permanent finance committee of session members to closely monitor income and expenses and propose balanced budgets during the budgeting process.
5. Assuming people follow through on their current capital campaign pledges as anticipated and considering additional payments to the Legacy & Leadership campaign above and beyond pledges, we are on target to pay off the capital campaign debt in June 2021 as planned.
6. Once the capital campaign is completed in June 2021, the session will invite and challenge the congregation to dedicate a percentage of what they were giving in the capital campaign to operating budget in 2021 and beyond.
7. Annual average giving to the capital campaign has been \$379k since 2012.

## Stewardship Program Initiatives

1. Establish a planned/legacy giving program with routine education opportunities using resources from the Presbyterian Foundation, if appropriate. (Stewardship & Investment/Stephanie)
2. Provide year-round age/stage appropriate financial education for the whole congregation including personal/family financial planning and the spiritual practice of stewardship. (Stewardship/Stephanie)
3. Bring in outside resources for stewardship leader education (Lake Institute on Faith & Giving, Thrivent, etc.) and/or provide funding for church members to attend stewardship conferences like Stewardship Kaleidoscope (Stewardship/Stephanie)