

# **STRATEGIC PLAN FOR 2011-2014**

The First Presbyterian Church of Gainesville, Georgia  
December, 2010

## **Background**

This strategic plan is more process than product. In the fall of 2009, acting on the recommendation of consultant David York, the Session began a strategic planning process drawing on (a) the work of an earlier future planning team; (b) recommendations by consultants *The Arthur Alley Group*; and (c) insight gleaned from studying three books, many articles, and much demographic information. The Session conducted congregational surveys and audited the church ministries. Some of the church's standing committees offered recommendations in specific areas. Deacons and Elders at the annual retreat in February 2010 focused almost entirely on this strategic planning process.

## **The Process**

As the process began, the Session set out to answer the following questions:

1. Who are we, and who do we aspire to be?
2. Where are we statistically?
3. What is the status of our congregational health?
4. Where do we want to go?
5. How do we get there?

The sections that follow offer some answers to these questions.

### 1. **Who Are We, and Who Do We Aspire To Be?**

First Presbyterian Church is a congregation of God's people in Gainesville Georgia.

Our stated **Mission** is "**to embrace, equip, and empower in Christ.**"

Our **Vision** is "**to be a part of the body of Christ.**"

(Many of the following *Vision and Ministry of Member* statements are modified from the proposed "Foundations for Presbyterian Polity and Form of Government" and are good expressions of our own beliefs about our vision.)

Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. First Presbyterian strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world. We aspire to be:

- A community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone.
- A community of hope, rejoicing in the sure and certain knowledge that, in Christ, God is making a new creation. This new creation is a new beginning for human life and for all things.
- A community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.
- A community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its word.

## **From *The Ministry of Members***

We believe that each faithful member should bear witness to God's love and grace and should be involved responsibly in the ministry of Christ's church, (1) reviewing and evaluating regularly the integrity of his or her own membership and (2) considering ways in

which participation in the worship and service of the church may be increased and made more meaningful. Such involvement includes many, if not all, of the following actions:

- taking part in the common life and worship of the congregation
- proclaiming the Good News in word and deed
- lifting one another up in prayer, mutual concern and active support
- studying Scripture and the issues of Christian faith and life
- supporting the ministry of the church through the giving of money, time, and talents
- responding to God's activity in the world through service to others
- living responsibly in the personal, family, vocational, political, cultural, and social relationships of life
- working in the world for peace, justice and human fulfillment, and
- participating in the governing responsibilities of the church, if led.

## **2. Where Are We Statistically?**

First Presbyterian Church is a congregation of God's people in Gainesville, Georgia. It is a congregation that includes many talented and dedicated individuals. We are located in an area where population growth is expected within fifteen miles of the church, where the percentage of families with young children is above the national average, education is below the national average, the percentage of rental housing is above the national average, and household income is above the national average.

There are several larger churches in the Gainesville area, including Free Chapel, First Methodist, First Baptist, and Lakewood Baptist (the latter three being located within four miles of us). There is only one other PCUSA church within fifteen miles, and it has a membership of forty-nine people.

First Presbyterian is larger and wealthier than the typical Presbyterian Church.

Within the Northeast Georgia Presbytery, there are only three churches with more than 500 members, and only two churches have an average weekly worship attendance of over 300. In nine of the last ten years, the number of members in almost all churches within our Presbytery has declined.

For the period 1999-2009, membership in the denomination has declined by 1.9% annually. If our church had followed that trend, membership would have declined by 19 members per year, meaning a loss of approximately 190 members during that ten-year period.

For that same time frame, our church membership actually increased during the first three years (1999-2001), held steady from 2001 to 2006, and then declined (2006-2009). The high was 1200 members; the low was 978. The largest membership drop during those ten years came in 2002, plausibly attributed to a purging of the rolls by our interim minister at the time, resulting in an official reduction (not actual attendance) of 190 members. Nonetheless, membership numbers remain a concern of this congregation. For those ten years, worship attendance numbers varied with highs around 600 (1999-2004), but that number has declined steadily since 2005 from 550 to 400.

Christian education attendance has been more variable with lows in 2003 and 2006. The Session has been diligent about maintaining accurate rolls, so some changes in membership may reflect record keeping as well as attendance. The number of new members exceeded the number of losses in 1999-2001 and 2005-2006 and will probably do so again in 2010.

Losses in membership can be attributed to several causes, in addition to the losses through members' deaths or relocations: relevance of worship, satisfaction with programs and spiritual growth opportunities, continuity of leadership, harmony and discord in the congregation, and hospitality, each of which will be addressed in later sections.

The recent economic downturn has not left us untouched. According to the *Barna Group* (<http://www.barna.org>) budgets were down by 7% in 2009 across all Protestant churches. The typical "down" church lost 14% of its budget. Large churches (with more than 250 adults) were more likely to report being under duress. Churches have attempted to address this downturn in three major ways: reducing expenses, cutting staff and missions, and reducing facility budgets (including deferred maintenance). In January 2010, the percentage of adults who have reduced their giving to churches increased to 29% as compared to 20% in January 2008. Our own budget was reduced by 20% last year.

First Presbyterian has not been immune to the downturn in giving. We are entering a third year of reduced income and thus reduced budgets. With less money to work with come issues relating to expenses, staff, and maintenance, affecting all areas of congregational life.

During the planning and examination process over the past two years, the Session identified and acted upon several important issues. Among those were:

- The status of the Child Development Center (CDC) - We reaffirmed its importance as a viable ministry of this church.
- The size of the Session - We are in the process of reduction from 27 to 18 members.
- The viability of three Sunday morning worship services - We reduced the number to two services (one traditional & one blended), given the low attendance at the 8:30am service and the strain placed on the pastoral staff.
- Personnel Matters - We clarified hiring, firing, and evaluation authority and procedures.

Numbers in parentheses in the following sections of the document refer to action items in the chart at the end.

### **3. What Is the Status of our Congregational Health?**

From 2008-2010, a leadership change in the senior pastorate greatly affected the congregational health of First Presbyterian Church, a painful process for all concerned. The Session, receiving numerous letters, membership transfers, and complaints regarding the senior pastor's leadership, attempted to address those concerns in various ways, e.g., prayer, Session/personnel/pastor consultation, and the use of consultants.

Those issues culminated in a no-confidence vote by a majority of the Session in February, 2010 and in the subsequent dissolution of the senior pastoral relationship by Presbytery. As is often the case in such situations, there were members who were dismayed by the action. Given the demands of confidentiality in such situations, many questions, rumors, and untruths could not be addressed directly.

Healing has been a slow and difficult process following the pastor's departure, but the congregation seems ready now to move on.

Some members are having difficulty reaching closure; remaining issues include:

- Some members' need for healing, residuals from the pastor's departure described earlier (1) -
- A lack of support for the Morning Light service by some members, despite its popularity with a segment of the congregation - (Because that lack of support is openly voiced, that opinion is hurtful to others who value more contemporary worship. While this service is an essential element in reaching younger people, the service includes congregants of all ages. There is also a need to evaluate the music/level of music support in this service (2). There is a healthy crossover between the two services among all age groups in the congregation.)
- A lack of understanding and trust regarding the roles and actions of church officers, especially relative to the senior pastor issue - (Mistrust has continued to diminish. Concentrated efforts to improve communication should continue to accelerate congregational healing (3).)
- Lack of agreement on the worship schedule - (Disagreement has lead to continual lobbying to change things. The worship committee has not successfully communicated that the schedule will not be re-examined until there is a year's data regarding its effect (2). There is a need to reach closure on the number, style, time, and purpose of Sunday worship services.)

#### **4. Where Do We Want To Go?**

Worship and Programs: Members appear to be happy and satisfied with the nature and variety of worship, when time and place are not issues. Recent joint worship services have been popular and should continue.

The addition of a family minister appears to be paying dividends, and the emphasis on building relationships among younger families and providing activities for them seems to be working. The recent Bible study for younger women and the family camping activities are good examples of positive activities. More young adults are accepting leadership roles, and their children are happy and involved. We want to continue to support our programs that strengthen the young family.

Adults describe many parts of the church program as satisfying in embracing them and equipping them for ministry. These adults point to specific, meaningful, small groups like: Sunday school, Presbyterian Women, WOW fellowship, the prayer group, choir, leadership groups, and other small group activities. Many of these groups are intentional about lifting up one another in prayer, concern, and mutual support. These groups should be perpetuated. However, it is difficult for new members to learn how to attach themselves to a small group, and there is no clear path for initiating new, desired initiatives. Going forward, we need a program to mentor new members.

Two other segments of the church congregation remain relatively without a functioning group focused on their needs: (a) college/young adult and (b) younger senior adult (55-70-year-olds, who are active and just retiring). There is not a critical mass of individuals (4) of young adults and college age, and the younger senior adults (5) want more active and more meaningful activities. These groups are important in developing the church's financial future.

Leadership & Membership: During this planning process, the single most uniform agreement as to where we want to go was derived from one of the three books studied by the Session members, *Power Surge*. This book focused on shifting from a “membership model” to a “discipleship model.” In such a model, members carry significantly more responsibility for developing spiritual growth, mentoring other members, and for meeting congregational needs. Steven Ministry and the Prayer Group are two examples of the discipleship model already operating here.

As the Session leads and its size is reduced, it will have to change the current committee structure by combining and adding responsibilities. Some consolidation is already occurring; for example, Evangelism and Christ Light have merged. Other potential fusions are under discussion, e.g., the relationship of family ministries, youth ministries, and children’s ministries. Another area (communication) is in need of unification. Session committees should re-examine their member representation, with a specific eye on possible under-representation of women and younger members on the Finance, Personnel, and Operations committees. These items, as well as continual operational auditing, should be monitored by a perpetual strategic planning committee, which would be charged with making recommendations to the Session, setting and monitoring goals, and reporting to the congregation each November.(6)

Mission and Outreach: First Presbyterian is serious about mission and outreach, but many members and outsiders know little of the church’s actions and accomplishments in these fields. Financial contributions from Sunday School classes, FPC members’ personal donations, the World Mission Conference, *Habitat for Humanity*, mission trips with accompanying fund-raising, and the endowment do not appear in the church’s general budget; indeed, one must be fairly well connected to these programs to understand just how extensively they are supported by our church. The number of members donating non-financial support, time, and talent to outside ministries is also extensive (*NEGA Food Pantry*, *Habitat* construction, *Safe Haven*, *Good News At Noon*). Enhanced communication in this area is also important and should be improved (3).

Outreach to visitors through the Andrew Ministry is organized and genuine. New members comment positively on its effectiveness, but many older members are unaware of the efforts of a few in this area. Because our church is a large church, we need a program to mentor new members (7). The evangelism and family ministry teams should deliberately focus on forming connections between members.

Evangelism seems to be a difficult area for Presbyterians. We open our facility to many groups and try to be hospitable to all, but we should better teach our members about evangelism. We should plan more events specifically for the Gainesville/Hall community so that people will be comfortable with our members and our facility. Again, additional communication here is important.

We also need at least one concentrated, well publicized, whole church, Local Missions Day (or Weekend) each year. This event should be inter-generational so that each of us sets a local outreach example for one another, demonstrating that we are working together for a common goal. This event should be well publicized throughout the entire community (8).

While the church has a redesigned website, its use of social media (9), such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*, is either ineffective or nonexistent; its use is sometimes even actively discouraged by some staff members. Media efforts are essential elements in an evangelism strategy focused on younger demographics. All similar churches in the Gainesville community use social media as an additional communication tool to reach some demographic groups.

### Overall Fiscal Picture:

Finances/Budget: For the last two years, despite active stewardship efforts, a budget was not ready by January when the new fiscal year began, opening each of those years with much uncertainty. To alleviate that uncertainty, the stewardship campaign began early, and the Session committed itself to providing future budgets prior to officer turnover in January. As stated previously, FPC has not been immune to the global financial downturn, and weak congregational health has negatively impacted the budget. Whatever the cause, the FPC budget has seen a 20% reduction in the past two years.

The upcoming budget will be challenged in at least two areas: Staff and Facilities.

- **Staff:** By the end of January, we will have completed our financial obligations to former Senior Pastor David McDonald. The Session has authorized a search for an interim pastor, but it is not clear whether our future budgets can support three pastors. Coincidentally, the current deficit figure is approximately the same size as the salary of our third pastor. Studies of denominational staffing patterns suggest that the typical ministerial staff for a church of our size is two pastors and a parish associate. We are also staffed a little more heavily in the area of music and children/youth than is typical, but those two programs' staffing levels have always been deliberate priorities. One of the tasks of an interim pastor (working, of course, in conjunction with the Session and personnel committee) will be to determine the optimal staffing structure for our church (10). This issue must be confronted and resolved as a part of the search process for a permanent senior pastor.
- **Facilities:** Our existing facility is more than thirty years old. Both the *Arthur Alley* report and our Operations Committee listed significant facility needs, including deferred maintenance items. Some of those needs were immediate and could not be deferred, especially roof and water leaks; therefore, because there had been no funds set aside for those repairs, the church secured a line of credit from the bank to make the most critical repairs and began paying only the interest on that note (debt now balancing at approximately \$300,000). Other, critical issues remaining are the heating system, lighting, and the parking lot.

If we are to assume a position of fiscal responsibility, the Session must address both the line of credit's negative balance and our growing list of deferred maintenance items, probably through a capital campaign (12). While our Finance and Operations committees must take the lead, financial solvency is the Session's responsibility. The Session must communicate effectively with the congregation if we are to be successful in this important endeavor.

### "Quiet" help:

FPC relies heavily on volunteers and generosity in many areas, but there is no consistent program or method to thank these individuals. Designated gifts outside the budget from charitable church members have recently funded facility improvements in the parlor, Lake House, and courtyard. Another example is our new coffee kitchen, and the organ replacement was the result of a huge bequest. While these members' give without seeking recognition, such contributions are worthy of thanks and gratitude (11). Going forward, we need a more defined system that encourages, recognizes, and records these special gifts and enhancements (14).

Endowment:

First Presbyterian is fortunate to have a well managed endowment fund directed for specific purposes such as missions, seminary education, housing, and welfare needs. The entire congregation is invited annually to hear reports on endowment activities. Additionally, we need a general endowment fund, the income from which could be used to cover unexpected events and/or budget shortfalls.(13) (14)

**5. How Do We Get There?**

The purpose of this strategic plan is to help First Presbyterian Church of Gainesville GA, over the next three years, fulfill its mission statement, to “Embrace, Equip, and Empower in Christ.” The goals associated with this mission statement follow.

1. **To Embrace** one another in the faith more fully by:
  - a. Providing and evaluating programs, worship, and activities which meet the spiritual, physical, and social needs of our members;
  - b. Improving congregational health;
  - c. Reaching out more effectively to college students, young adults, and senior adults;
  - d. Recognizing our volunteers for their many and diverse contributions; and
  - e. Communicating more effectively with all constituencies through a wide variety of media
2. **To Equip** the congregation and staff to effectively
  - a. Serving the local and international community in the image of Christ,
  - b. Spreading the good news about Jesus Christ and our church and its offerings,
  - c. Mentoring and incorporating new members, and
  - d. Leading and following with integrity and trust
3. **To Empower** the First Presbyterian Church to move forward by:
  - a. Seeking an interim pastor who will lead the Session and staff in an optimal staffing study, clarifying future staffing needs and structure;
  - b. Continuing and evaluating the strategic planning process;
  - c. Clarifying and approving funding procedures for major facility needs in order to provide and maintain an attractive, functional, church plant and campus;
  - d. Reducing dependence on the line of credit for standard repairs and improvements; and
  - e. Aligning all financial systems to enable the church to live within its means.

Action Plan

The table below presents an action plan. It is ordered to match the above text. Three items (#3, 10, & 12) are bolded as critical, but all items are important and interrelated.

Implementation of Plan, Timeline and Responsibilities

Item	Primary Responsibility	Timeline	Expected results
<b>Congregational Health</b>			
1. Congregational health	Interim Pastor , pastoral staff, deacons congregational care	Strategy in place by June 2011	Reduced tension

Item	Primary Responsibility	Timeline	Expected results
2. Worship evaluation, including satisfaction study with Morning Light attendees	Pastoral staff, worship committee	ML evaluation by June 2011, to include evaluation of ML music Service schedule re-evaluation by October 2011	Change or reaffirmation, depending on study results
<b>3. Enhanced communication (including budget, missions, online strategies)</b>	<b>Session, staff</b>	<b>Appoint a communications committee or director in January 2011 to address identified issues. Include all strategies and consider congregational demographics (e.g., more print for older members, more media for younger.)</b>	<b>More frequent missions minutes at WOW and in services Clearer understanding of monetary and non monetary giving within the congregation Volunteer recognition</b>
<b>Worship and Programs</b>			
4. College and young adult outreach	Family minister, Youth Ministries	Strategy in place by June 2011	Growth by 10 individuals in one year
5. Younger senior adult programming	Senior adult council, Adult ministries (perhaps a task force here, or enhanced adult ministries group)	Interest Surveys by Feb 2011 Functioning planning group by March 2011	At least two new fellowship, spiritual growth or activity programs for the target group in place by August 2011
<b>Leadership and Membership</b>			
6. Strategic planning	New Session committee (see text)	Appoint in January	Annual reports to congregation in November (see 3 above) Enhanced efficiency
7. Evangelism training and new member mentoring	Pastoral staff, deacons	Planning period, spring 2011, Implementation Spring 2012	Examination of Power Surge, Greater understanding of personal evangelism, church wide strategies
<b>Mission and Outreach</b>			
8. Whole church local missions project	Ministry of missions, adult ministry, children's ministry, youth ministry, deacons	Project to occur in August 2011	Intergenerational participation, missions excitement, publicity

Item	Primary Responsibility	Timeline	Expected results
9. Use of social media	AV coordinator, CDC curriculum director, church publisher, pastoral staff, evangelism, interested members	Staff and/or members to attend training conference before August 2011 <i>Facebook</i> page activated/reactivated by Feb 2011 <i>Facebook</i> and electronic phone communication available to CDC by Jan 2011	Better communication with under 40's and CDC parents
<b>Financial Stewardship</b>			
<b>10. Optimal staffing study</b>	<b>Interim pastor, finance and personnel, Session</b>	<b>Complete within 3 months of hiring interim</b>	<b>Guidance as to how to proceed with staffing and pastoral searches consistent with budget. Optimal staffing decision by March 2011</b>
11. Volunteer recognition	Deacons	Plan in place by August 2011, implementation during fall.	Volunteers feel appreciated, congregation understands opportunities
<b>12. Plan for addressing budget, deferred maintenance and line of credit balance</b>	<b>Pastoral staff, Session, endowment committee, operations, finance</b>	<b>Budget consistent with resources Capital campaign plan</b>	<b>Silent period ends December 2011</b>
13. Endowment development	Endowment committee and finance committee	See above	See Text
14. Encouragement of special gifts and development of procedures for handling, recording and recognizing them.	Endowment, operations, finance, staff	Guidelines for accepting gifts, especially those which require continuing costs or those of a temporary nature such as landscaping Development of needs and priorities.	Permanent record of gifts of all types  Gift policy