



Webster Groves Presbyterian Church
Mission Study
May 2022

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Table of Contents:

Introduction	3
Over 155 Years of Faith and Strength	4
Mission and Core Ministries	5
Culture	7
Finances	8
Physical Building	9
Priorities for the Future	10
Staffing Needs	10
Conclusion	11

WGPC Mission Study

May, 2022

Introduction

Webster Groves Presbyterian Church, like all churches, faced multiple challenges during the early months of the pandemic. These included loss of staff over an eighteen-month period: a long tenured youth pastor, a person whose role was focused on communications and congregational connections and, in the fall of 2021, our associate pastor who had primary responsibilities for children and youth.

The session voted in December of 2021 to engage the services of Holy Cow Consulting to complete a congregational assessment. We sensed that going into the pandemic the church was “healthy”, but we were unsure what impact the pandemic had on members’ perception of “church and we needed quantitative data to understand our church more fully.

Leaders were confident the Holy Cow tool would:

- Measure the level of satisfaction and energy in our congregation.
- Identify critical success factors for improving church climate.
- Pinpoint the strengths of our congregation’s culture.
- Discover where members would like to go in the future.
- Enable us to know more clearly what staff our church needs.
- Prepare us for a search for our next youth minister and/or associate pastor.

80% of the assessment contained standardized questions enabling a comparison of WGPC to approximately two thousand mainline churches in their database. The senior pastor along with two other church leaders with skills in organizational development coordinated the assessment process, follow-up meetings with church leaders and the writing of this study. Other representatives from different areas of the church provided ongoing input and direction.

The tool was administered in March 2022. Holy Cow bases its return rate on average Sunday attendance. The average Sunday attendance pre pandemic and current is about 235. Based on that number, WGPC had a 98% response rate to the assessment, one of the highest Holy Cow has seen. We took that as a positive sign of member’s commitment to our church.

On April 10, 2022 over forty Elders, Deacons and Trustees gathered for three hours to hear and begin discussion of the results of the congregational assessment delivered by Holy Cow. Session and Trustees then meet on April 17 to discuss and then adopt four core ministries and four top priorities of the church based on the findings. They also began discussing the ideal staffing design. Those conversations continued in various forums over the next month with other church members and staff. At their May meeting, a proposed staffing plan was adopted by the Session. They also reviewed and provided input into this Mission Study.

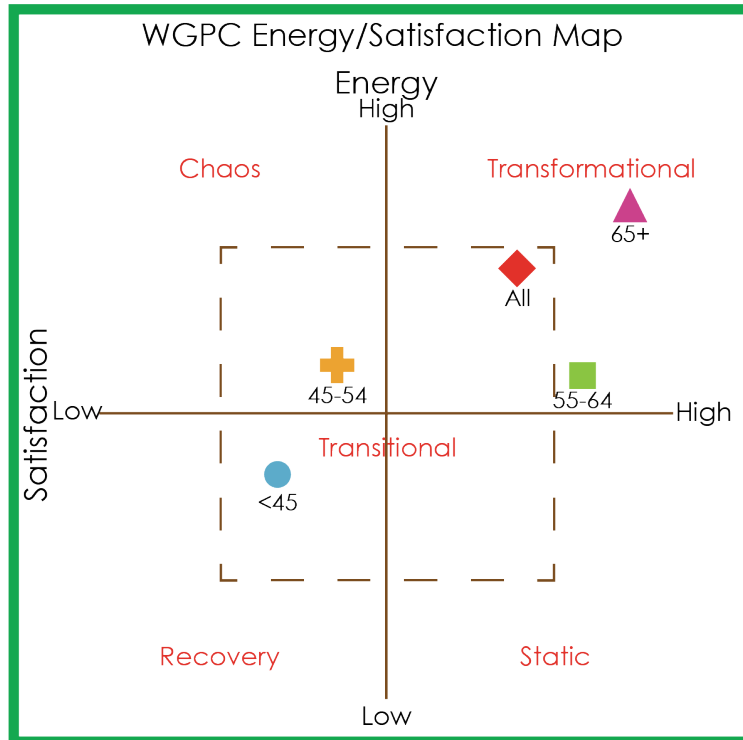
This document is the mission study for WGPC as it seeks to hire a new associate pastor for Faith and Families. The appendix includes all the data from the church's Vital Signs report generated by Holy Cow. Key findings are included in the following discussion.

WGPC: Over 155 Years of Faith and Strength

We are a church founded in 1865. Our church has flourished and survived all the changes that occurred over the past 155 years. Passages from Jeremiah and the Psalms both talk of a tree planted near the river that flourishes and bears fruit even when faced with drought, an apt metaphor for WGPC. Like a tree planted near a river, WGPC has strong roots that are anchored in grace and has love abounding from its branches. The church historically has been traditional in its approach to worship and programming. Some would say it has been slow to change and would also say it has been challenging for visitors and new members to feel welcome and to assimilate into the church. Our desire is that our branches of love continue to break through these inward-focused barriers to spread the love of Christ throughout our community. It has been and continues to be a financially stable church

The current pastor was called in 2015. There had been significant upheaval in the years that preceded his arrival, however, strong youth and children's ministries, a respected music program and long-standing mission outreach commitment and programming were in place. Perhaps most important, it was a talented congregation that cares deeply about their church. There were two services, a contemporary and traditional, on Sunday morning. An effective interim pastor had helped stabilize the congregation yet there was a lot of work to do. The current pastor's strong spiritual leadership, personal style and administrative skills have been the catalyst for the church to emerge as a healthy system. The congregation responded positively to the new leadership. Together we were ready for the next chapter.

Intuitively it seemed that things were going well at the close of 2021 as we began to emerge from the pandemic. The results of the March 2022 assessment validated this impression. The following graph shows the relationship between satisfaction with the church and level of energy.



Overall, there is a high degree of satisfaction and energy, but there are marked differences in how different demographic groups experience the church. Future work includes separate focus groups with under 45-year-old members and 45 – 54-year-old members to better understand their needs, wants and perceptions.

We currently have a membership of 629 members. The historic pattern of little racial diversity in membership continues today. 99% of assessment respondents are white. 70% lived within four miles or less from the church. Our on-line worship option now enables homebound, people living out of area and out of state to worship with us. 80% of the assessment respondents prefer in-person worship while 20% prefer on-line. Our church radius is growing. We are a well-educated congregation with 40% having an undergraduate degree and 49% having graduate degrees.

WGPC: Mission and Core Ministries

"We seek to live God's love, welcome all people and joyfully serve God."
WGPC Mission Statement

We are a church committed to our mission. This mission statement means we are an intergenerational congregation of people doing our best to love each other and our neighbors as Jesus Christ calls us to do. We work at this by creating worship that connects us to God and to each other. In addition, we emphasize service to others through strong mission outreach because we believe our neighbors extend from our community to the rest of the world. WGPC values and is committed to the following designations.

- Earth Care Congregation
- Matthew 25 Congregation
- More Light Congregation
- Certified Hunger Action Congregation

Assessment results showed that 17% respondents strongly agree and 47% agree that WGPC has been effective in fulfilling our mission. Another 10% did not know the stated mission. A clear opportunity is to keep a focus on our mission moving forward.

We also live out our faith spiritually and humbly because we know we don't have all the answers. As a matter of fact, we find joyful freedom in asking questions and accepting we are not perfect! Questions, grace, forgiveness, compassion, and joy abound at WGPC. There is one service on Sunday morning available in-person or on-line. The worship service is followed by learning opportunities for adults and children with youth activities in the evening. Other learning opportunities are available throughout the week.

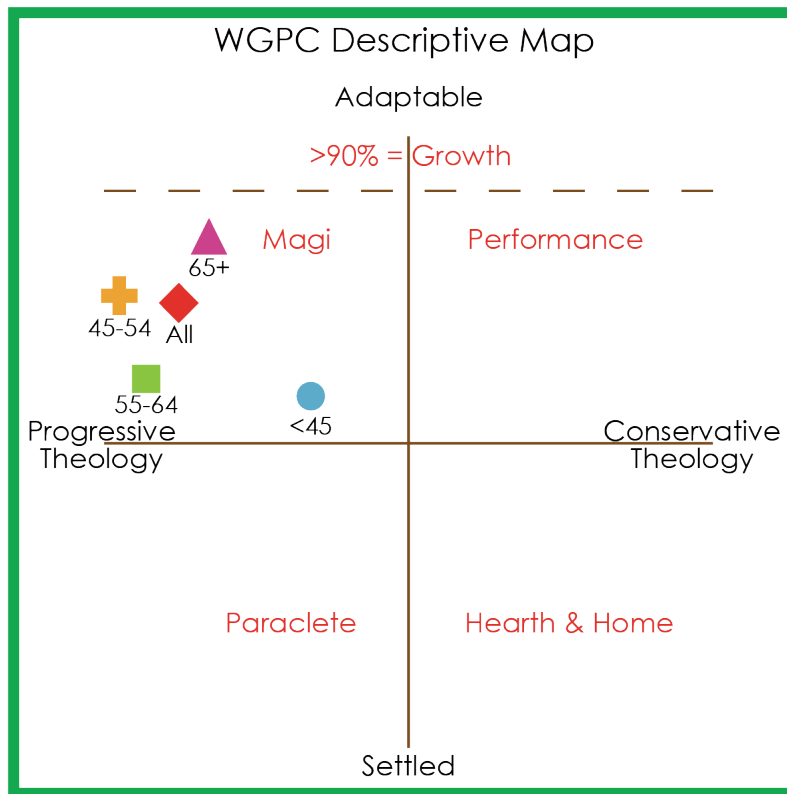
To carry out the church's mission, four core ministries were adopted by Session in April 2022, following a review and discernment of the assessment results.

- Education – Children, Youth and Adult:
 - Historically children and youth have been a strength of WGPC. These capabilities have now faded with the loss of key staff persons. Assessment respondents made it clear that these ministries are needed, wanted and must be reimagined and rebuilt.
 - With the leadership of WGPC's Resident Theologian, the Adult Faith formation opportunities have been revitalized with attendance at Sunday morning offerings are increasing.
- Congregational Connections and Caring Ministries:
 - The assessment also made it clear that relationships within the church community are extremely important to our members. There is work to be done to become more welcoming and to intentionally strengthen relationships within generations and across generations. Respondents also commented that they believe pastoral and congregational care is vitally important. Another area to strengthen.
- Worship and Music:
 - Worship is vitally important to WGPC members. 77% of assessment respondents deemed the sermon the most important aspect of worship. When asked if the worship services at our church are exceptional in both quality and spiritual content, WGPC ranked at the 74th percentile compared to other churches. There is a need to further explore variation in worship perceptions based on age groups moving forward.

- Mission Outreach:
 - This is an area of current strength for WGPC. A few years ago, after a sizeable bequest to the church, three focus areas for mission were created: food and housing security, education and empowerment and stronger community. In recent years it has expanded to include Environmental Stewardship and Advocacy and Social Justice. Our members want to continue this focus.

WGPC : Culture

We are a church with a unique culture, as is true of all churches. Our culture has been changing over the past years. The once “slow to change” WGPC has become more adaptable and flexible as demonstrated on the following chart from Holy Cow.



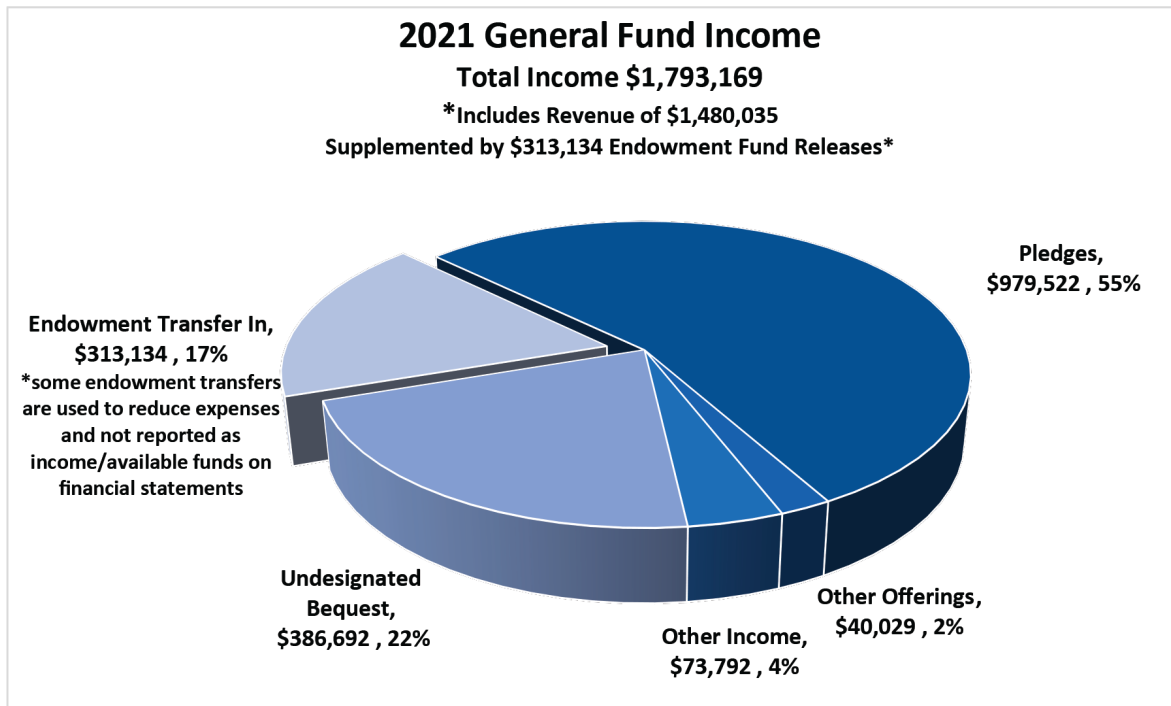
Although WGPC is now more adaptable than it was historically, Holy Cow recommended the church continue to strive to increase our flexibility. They have found that flexibility above the 90th percentile is a major driver of church energy and growth.

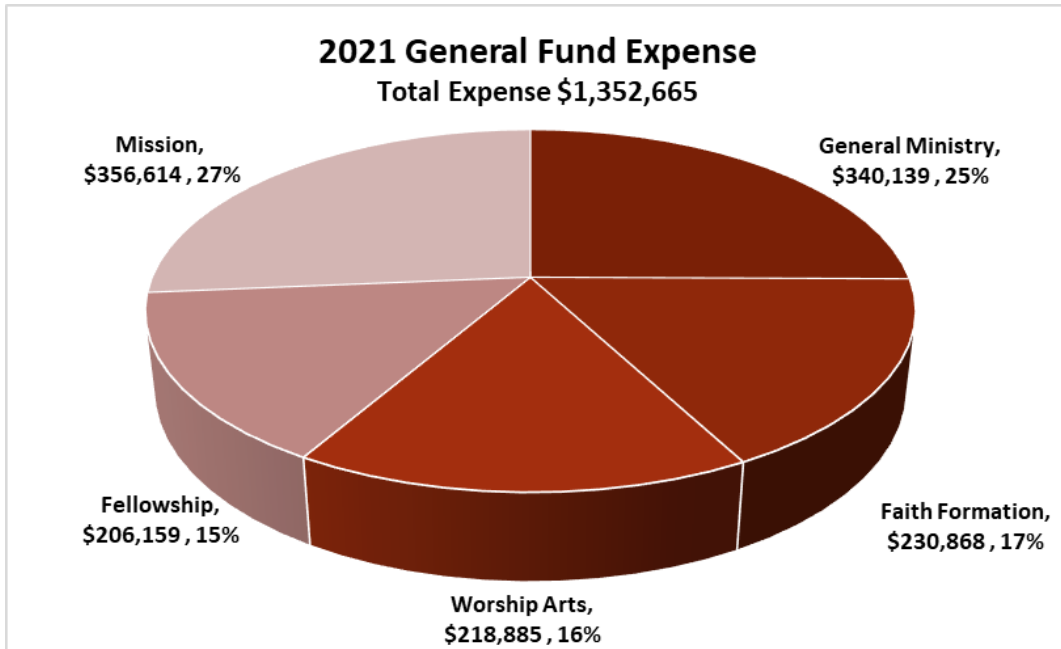
There had been conflict in the summer of 2020 as the church took a stand on the need to address systemic racism/Black Lives Matter. We were optimistic that the conflict had been effectively managed. Results from the survey showed a relatively low level of conflict in the church. This came as no surprise to church leaders who are sure it is residual concerns from the social justice stand taken by the church. Some leaders expressed surprise and relief that the residual conflict was not high.

Holy Cow measured eight indicators which influence the vitality of a church. Overall WGPC responses were compared to other mainline churches. Holy Cow highlighted major strengths at WGPC as well as areas of opportunity. There is subtlety and nuance in interpreting these results of each of these indicators as well as variation between age groups. Session will be studying these key indicators in the weeks and months to come to determine what additional clarification is needed and then to determine future focus in these areas.

WGPC: Finances

We are a church committed to financial stability. The charts below summarize the 2021 income and expenses of the church. Pledges for 2022 remain strong, with over half of the families pledging increasing their pledge and new pledges being received from 25 new families. In addition, WGPC is blessed with a strong endowment fund which has grown significantly due to a number of major gifts in the last few years.





WGPC: Physical Building

We believe God calls us to be stewards of our building, ensuring that our physical place reflects our identity and mission, and that our building is an extension of our faith. WGPC, like many older congregations, has a large, aging physical facility. There is ongoing work to continue to update the building mechanically and aesthetically.

WGPC has recently been blessed with several major bequests. Through discernment processes, some of those resources are targeted to building improvements. To ensure wise stewardship of those resources, the church has engaged in a process with Partners for Sacred Places Consulting to explore repurposing much of the educational wing of the church. That work, in collaboration with community leaders, is now underway. Similar work is underway to determine what changes need to be made in the chapel to best prepare to meet the future needs of the church in fulfilling its mission.

WGPC: Priorities for the Future

We are a church with a clear direction for our future. There are aspects of the assessment that showed differences in perception between demographic groups. One aspect that was the same across all age groups are the necessary priorities for our future. In April 2022, WGPC Session adopted the following as the priorities to guide future planning and staffing:

- Attracting families with children and youth
- Reaching new people and incorporating them into the life of the church
- Nurturing meaningful congregational connections
- Providing Christian education and spiritual formation to all ages

These priorities along with our mission statement and four core ministries are the framework for determining our staffing moving forward.

WGPC: Staffing Needs

We are a church who needed a staffing plan to match our priorities and ministries going forward. Church leaders have spent extended hours in the spring of 2022 to understand the assessment findings and then prayerfully consider the message those results provide our church. We were unsure going into this process if an associate pastor was necessary or if the work could be completed by lay positions. The answer became clear as results were studied. WGPC needs an Associate Pastor for Faith and Family.

That position will:

- Lead and coordinate faith formation opportunities for all ages
- Collaborate with other staff and lay members to introduce new ways to enrich worship, focusing on young families, youth and children's ministries
- Minister to families through creative and flexible programming that engages and involves
- Create opportunities for families to share their lives of faith together through meaningful and lasting relationships

The Associate Pastor of Faith and Families will support the work of:

- Faith Formation Commission
- Worship Arts Commission
- Periodically attends Session and Deacons meetings

Session and Trustees identified the following as key knowledge and skills for an Associate Pastor. This will require more refinement by a Pastor Nominating Committee.

- Gifts of attracting others and building strong, healthy relationships
- Skills to engage others, especially children and youth
- Theological knowledge and ability to translate into learning experiences for all ages
- Innovative
- Effective leadership skills: empowering others, delegating, communicating a clear vision, etc...
- Effective communicator
- Productive, collaborative team member

WGPC will also create a new position, Director of Welcoming and Involvement. This lay position will be full time and work collaboratively with other members of the staff and members of the congregation and community at large. WGPC will also hire a part-time youth minister to work closely with the Associate Pastor of Faith and Families.

Conclusion

We are a church who now has a much clearer understanding of who we are. The WGPC experience of self-exploration using the tool provided by Holy Cow has exceeded our expectations. We have felt the hand of God throughout the process. The assessment demonstrated that WGPC enjoys a relatively high level of both satisfaction and energy compared to other churches and that our congregation is committed to our mission. Our challenge now is for younger people to experience the same feelings of satisfaction and energy as older members. We now know our mission is solid, our core ministries are clearly defined and our priorities for the upcoming years are shared across all age groups. The synergy among and between the senior pastor, other staff and the congregation can and will make the envisioned future a reality. We now need the new associate pastor and other planned positions to help lead the way.

The greatest surprise of the assessment process has been the affirmation the congregation has felt and the growing enthusiasm and confidence in our future that now exists. We clearly are like the tree planted near the river. We are confident we will continue to thrive rooted in grace and bearing fruits of love abounding as we seek to live God's love, welcome all people and joyfully serve God.