

First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant



Mission Study

Our Mission at First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant is to awaken all people to our need for a life-changing encounter with the living Lord Jesus Christ, and to encourage and equip each one to become his fully devoted follower.

Prepared October 2015

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Congregational Survey

First Covenant employed Holy Cow Consulting for the congregational survey. This is the blank copy of the survey. (Survey results can be found in Appendix A.)

A total of 175 out of 191 members participated in the survey. According to Holy Cow, this is a high level of responses.

Overall, 31% of our members are clearly satisfied with things in the church. This, along with other information, indicates that members can imagine a church with a higher level of vitality than they are currently experiencing and are searching for a pathway that will lead them to a stronger church.

Not every question is of equal importance to members. When asked how satisfied they are, members tend to focus on the issues addressed in the questions below. When they feel more positive in these areas, they tend to feel more positive overall.

- In important decisions in our church, adequate opportunity for consideration of different approaches is usually provided.
- Our Interim Pastor helps us accomplish our mission by bringing out the best in everyone.
- Being part of this church community has given new meaning to my life.
- The worship services at our church are exceptional in both quality and spiritual content.
- The leaders of our church show a genuine concern to know what people are thinking when decisions need to be made.

Conversely, when First Covenant members feel less positive about the areas above, they tend to feel less satisfied with their experience in the church overall.

Committees & Groups

Administration	personnel, budget, communication and stewardship
Congregational Care & Spiritual Growth	fellowship, membership and college ministry
Education Committee	children, youth and adult
Mission	local and global
Music & Worship Committee	music & worship
Nominating	prayerfully considers congregants' gifts for elected service
Stephen Ministry	individuals trained in Christian care-giving for one-on-one support
Deacons	elected board of 24 deacons to care for members' needs in our parishes
Trustees	elected board overseeing the financial aspects of Church of the Covenant
Session	Elected board – ruling elders of the church

Church Activities – First Covenant's Mission Statement in Action

First Covenant offers a variety of programs for spiritual growth and community involvement. The mission of our church has shifted from international missionary work to projects that impact the Erie community.

Our Neighbor's Place – First Covenant hosts a shelter for homeless persons in conjunction with Community Shelter Services of Erie. We provide beds, supper and showers for approximately 50 people nightly in two-week segments from November through April.

Sunday Suppers – First Covenant hosts weekly Sunday evening dinners for Erie's homeless, neighbors, individuals and families in poverty and those who are lonely. Dinners are served in cooperation with numerous other churches, families and groups. Approximately 150-185 persons are served weekly.

Vacation Bible School – First Covenant offers VBS each summer for children from the community as well as from our congregation.

Education – First Covenant provides opportunities throughout the week for spiritual growth for all age groups, including Sunday School, Bible Study and small group experiences.

Adult Choir & Bells – A cherished staple at First Covenant.

Youth Choir & Bells – Choir is incorporated into Sunday School for kids pre-k to 5th grade. Youth choir used to meet as a part of Covenant Connections on Wednesday nights, but it was incorporated into Sunday School in 2014 to help with attendance and provide a richer program for kids.

Sunday School – The Christian Education Committee is committed to working with membership to offer classes and opportunities for children, youth and adults that provide the spiritual development the congregation is searching for at First Covenant.

Fellowship – Members and guests are welcome in the parlor throughout Sunday morning – especially after both worship services for fellowship and refreshments. Special events in the church and the lives of members are celebrated after the 11 a.m. service. The Fellowship Committee also supports other church programming during the year.

Covenant Connections Held on Wednesday nights, this weekly gathering features dinner and fellowship. Last year, the focus shifted toward inviting our community to share a meal – including international students from Gannon University.

College Ministry – For more than 40 years, First Covenant has partnered with the Coalition for Christian Outreach to provide opportunities to minister to college students and young adults. We sponsor two college ministries yearly.

The Kirk House, a home located on First Covenant's campus and home to our campus ministers and approximately 14 Gannon University students each year. Residents pursue a deeper relationship with God and one another by through studying the Word and leaving one another up in prayer. Residents create an environment conducive to communication characterized by openness, positivity, patience and a willingness to sacrifice and compromise.

The College Ministry Work Group engages in monthly faith formation and supports students out of the understandings coming from these formations.

Activities include: weekly bible study (RESTORE) on Gannon's campus, followed by game night at the Kirk House; coffee, hot chocolate, sticky bun offering to students, parking lot tenants and others heading to school or work; Sunday teas for female college students (including international students); and Along the Way – offering hot dogs, sliders and beverages on weekends from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. for students headed to parties. This past year, Gannon University invited college ministers to lead an Ash Wednesday service on campus as an alternative for non-Catholic students.

Marion Medical Mission – Marion Medical Mission seeks to share the love of Christ with the extreme poor in Africa by providing all in need with a sustainable source of clean, safe drinking water. (Supported by funding and missionary work.)

C.R.O.P. Walk – Annual walk to fight hunger globally and locally within our community.

Operation Christmas Child – A project of Samaritan's Purse. Church of the Covenant participates in the program and also serves as a regional collection center.

Erie School District – Outreach through neighborhood schools. Support encompasses donations throughout the year (school supplies, gloves, backpacks, etc.) as well as reading to students.

Covenant Preschool – Established in 1949, Covenant Preschool is Erie's longest established early learning program and continues to be a leader in early childhood education. Four classrooms with observation windows are located on the second floor of First Covenant. The preschool program provides opportunities for each child to grow and learn through a variety of structured activities and free play experience. Classes are offered for 2-, 3- and 4-year olds as well as a pre-k class, enrichment and after care. Each summer, several camps are available for preschool children. Covenant Preschool boasts a dedicated teaching staff. All lead teachers are college graduates-many with graduate level degrees. A governing board of directors works with the preschool director to assure a quality program.

Block Party – Held in September, this annual event brings our community and congregation together for an evening of food, fun and games at no cost to attendees.

Various other groups meet on a regular basis, like Men's groups, a Women's Tea and Youth Group. Church of the Covenant also provides meeting space for the Young People's Chorus, Erie Philharmonic Chorus, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), a pre-release program through State Probation & Parole.

First Covenant Personnel Summary

Historically, First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant has been led by a senior pastor and at various times an ordained associate. The current temporary leadership has been here nearly three years, first as an Interim Pastor and more recently as a Temporary Supply Pastor.

Seph Kumer, a lay person, has served as Director of Youth and Family Ministries for 17 years. The beginning of his tenure was marked with a large number of youth. Now, with a smaller number of youth in our membership, his role centers on working with the growing international college students living within the Church's neighborhood. He works on neighborhood outreach, coordinates young family and youth programming, and oversees VBS, Christian Education and College Ministry, including the two college ministers.

In October 2015, the Session voted to change Seph Kumer's title from Director of Youth & Family Ministries to Director of Community Ministries to allow our church to focus on community ministry. A new Director of Youth & Family Ministries will be hired.

For many years, First Covenant has employed Rev. Stephen Morse, a part-time, retired, ordained teaching elder as Parish Assistant.

For the past four years, Leslie Weber has served as Music Director and Organist.

Music is a large part of the history of Church of the Covenant. The church had been recognized for a vibrant and active music program with professional musical leadership. For the last four years, the Church has employed a part-time interim leadership and reduced program.

Office staff consist of two fulltime employees: a custodian and a maintenance person. We also employ two part-time kitchen workers and a part-time receptionist.

We have developed a Personnel Manual and have Job Descriptions which cover responsibilities and expectations.

- Rev. Timm High – Temporary Supply Pastor
- Rev. Stephen E. Morse – (part-time) Parish Associate
- Joseph (Seph) Kumer – Director of Community Ministries
- Leslie Weber – (interim) Organist & Choirmaster
- Montgomery (Monty) Service – (interim) Children/Youth Music
- Lisa Hiegel – Covenant Preschool Director
- JoAnn Peters – Finance/Records Administration
- Abby Blakenship– Campus Minister
- Position Open – Campus Minister
- Jackie Jones – Night Host/Cook
- Luba Kovalchuk – Custodian
- Anne Sauer – Receptionist
- Position Open – Maintenance Mechanic
- Position Open – Director of Youth & Family Ministries

Organization & Leadership

Session: Consists of 15 ruling elders divided into three classes, with each class serving three-year terms.

Board of Deacons: Consists of 18 members including a moderator, vice-moderator, treasurer, secretary and parish leaders serving three-year terms.

Trustees: Consists of 12 members serving staggered terms of three years. Major functions include administration of the budget, management of endowments and other special funds, as well as maintenance of the church's property and real estate.

Note: The aforementioned groups are organized with staggered terms to ensure continuity.

Personality

Following a discernment period of more than a year, Session identified hospitality as the embodiment of our mission. First Covenant is a church in transition. We are defining our missional activities in light of this new understanding. Keeping God at the center of everything we do, we continually ask, "What is God's mission for our church?"

During this continued discernment time, we work through Session, our boards and communities, along with the thoughts and ideas of our congregation to answer this key question.

With God's help, anything is possible. We are ready to be amazed by God and amazed in serving God.

History

First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant has deep roots in the Erie community. Divisions and mergers of significant Presbyterian congregations dominate the history of the church. First Presbyterian Church first organized on Feb. 14, 1815. They purchased property on the corner of 5th and Peach Streets in 1825.

In the summer of 1926, three strong, independent downtown Presbyterian churches (First Presbyterian Church, Park Church and Central Church) discussed reuniting of their congregations to advance the Gospel in downtown Erie. After deliberation, the congregation of First Presbyterian Church decided to not proceed with the merger. This was revisited a year later, with the merger approved in 1927.

Upon completion of a new church building, the plan called for the congregation of Park Church, formerly located at South Perry Square, to unite with the congregation of Central Church. The two churches formed a committee consisting of four members from each congregation with an independent chairman. A Plan of Union committee purchased land, and made financial arrangements to build a new church edifice. The Committee ultimately purchased land stretching from 6th to 7th Streets near the intersection with Myrtle Street.

The united congregation recorded an initial membership of 1,804 people. On June 16, 1929, the newly formed congregation celebrated laying the cornerstone for the new church building.

In spring 1979, a member of First Presbyterian Church approached Dr. John Bathgate, executive presbyter of the Presbytery of Lake Erie, to propose merger of First Presbyterian Church and the Church of the Covenant. Dr. Bathgate held discussions with both pastors, Dr. J. Edward Paul of First Presbyterian Church and Dr. Lewis M. Evans of the Church of the Covenant. After consultation with both Sessions, congregations, the congregations were united on January 4, 1981. The new church became known as "First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant," or more commonly, "First Covenant." Gannon University purchased the former First Presbyterian Church building for use as their chapel.

The pastor of the former First Presbyterian Church, the Reverend J. Edward Paul, became the associate pastor of the united congregation. He joined with the Rev. Dr. Lewis M. Evans, pastor of the former Church of the Covenant, who served as Senior Pastor of the united congregation.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the church underwent a succession of pastors serving for short terms and not always leaving under positive circumstances. Most recently in 2012, the congregation experienced a rift with the termination of a staff member that ultimately led to the pastor leaving for another call. Subsequently, several members of the congregation (40+) left to begin a new Presbyterian Church in Erie County.

Pastors of First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant

Rev. Dr. Lewis M. Evans 1/4/81-5/31/92 (continuing from Church of the Covenant)

Rev. Dr. Robert A. Melone, Jr. 10/25/92-7/31/00

Rev. Dr. Steven M. Marsh 6/30/02-7/15/06

Rev. Dr. Dale E. Southorn 10/12/08-5/6/12

(This list does not include assistant/associate/interim pastors.)

From May of 1992-2012 (20 years), First Covenant was served by three pastors and one intentional interim. These four installed pastors ran the gamut from theologically conservative (Drs. Evans, Melone and Marsh) to theologically liberal (Dr. Southorn).

Dr. Melone was a young pastor when he was pursued by the pastor nominating committee after Dr. Evans' retirement. Dr. Melone's time of service was generally well accepted, although the vast difference in age between him and Dr. Evans was tough for some people. He took a new call after shepherding the Vision 21 process, a planning process that strongly shaped the search process for the next pastor (who ended up being Dr. Marsh). This is when the congregation employed an intentional interim, Rev. Dr. Charlie Webster, between Dr. Melone's departure and Dr. Marsh's arrival.

Dr. Marsh was called from a teaching position at Sterling College in Sterling, KS. He sought a new call after four years, in part over his perception that the congregation was not willing to live into the strongly evangelical commitment of Vision 21.

The church continued without an intentional interim pastor after Dr. Marsh's departure, relying on the Rev. Dr. Gregg Townsend, associate pastor at the time (recruited from California by Dr. Marsh), to serve as the acting pastor/head of staff. Dr. Townsend did so through December 2007 when he left for a new call in North East, PA.

Dr. Southorn came to First Covenant after serving as associate pastor for at least one large, multiple-staff congregation on the West Coast, desiring to be pastor of a multiple-staff church. Upon arrival, he was told by three individuals acting as de facto head(s) of staff that they could run the church and did not need him as the head of staff. This set up the conflicts that unfolded during his service.

Dr. Southorn was under the understanding from the Pastor Nominating Committee that he could organize his own staff. (Dr. Evans had set the tone by firing numerous staff members.) He dismissed one full-time volunteer staff member and a full-time staff property manager. As a result of dismissing the full-time Minister of Music, there was resistance and conflict that eventually resulted in Dr. Southorn seeking a new call. (Note: The three persons who were dismissed served as the de facto head(s) of staff during the time between Dr. Marsh's departure and Dr. Southorn's arrival.)

The change in church and culture has been tremendous in the 20 years between Dr. Evan's installation in 1992 and Dr. Southorn's departure in 2012. When First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant was formed in 1981, membership was more than 1,000, and the new church was known as "a place to see and be seen" by leaders within the city and county. The congregation was formal. Dr. Melone's service was marked by the continued favor of the merger, his theological orientation being favorable to most of

the membership, and by skills in leadership that resulted in the extensive Vision 21 study. The service of Rev. Webster as an interim was received more or less benignly.

Dr. Marsh's term uncovered some challenges that the decline of Christendom began to point out. The church was not going to automatically grow in numbers as it had in the past. First Covenant needed to embrace mission as a central-piece of its ministry, and the economics of a large non-clergy staff became challenging. (Rev. Townsend, associate pastor during and following Dr. Marsh's time, was the last associate pastor, leaving December 2007).

Dr. Marsh was an unapologetic evangelical with hopes for growing First Covenant into a large regional, if not mega, church, and was frustrated by his perception that the community of faith was willing to pay only "lip service" rather than "life service" to Vision 21. By the time Dr. Southorn arrived, the age of post-Christendom was in place, even if it wasn't recognized. The hope was still that First Covenant could regain its influence both as a church and as part of the culture. The decision to not invite an intentional interim to serve in the wake of Dr. Marsh's departure helped to create the environment into which Dr. Southorn walked. His more liberal position on theological issues was challenging for some members of the congregation, but in the end it was the conflict amongst and around the staff that caused him to search for a new call.

The Session employed the Rev. Timm High as an intentional interim pastor beginning Sept. 1, 2012.

Our Community

First Covenant is located in the City of Erie in the West Bayfront Neighborhood.

According to recent survey results from the Great Ideas Grant through the Erie Community Foundation, the West Bayfront Neighborhood, where First Presbyterian Church of the Covenant is located, experienced a 70% concentration of low and moderate income households and poverty rates on average, which is higher in comparison to other neighborhoods in the City of Erie.

The neighborhood has vast potential to be a thriving, diverse neighborhood given its location near the downtown business district, the adjacent Gannon University campus, the Lake Erie waterfront and easy access to transportation and recreational opportunities. Last spring, the neighborhood received \$50,000 in grants toward revitalization.

While First Covenant is located within the West Bayfront Neighborhood, it's also important to note that the congregation is divided into nine parishes within Erie County that cover beyond Erie County. (Please see the Appendix for details.)

Population Trends

According to the 2013 FullInsite Report which provides a demographic portrait of a customized two-mile radius of First Covenant, the following trends are noted:

- The geographic area around the church should experience little population change.
- Projected racial and ethnic changes (2010-2017) point to a 12% decline in white (non-Hispanic) population. The Black/African American populations is projected to increase by 9%. Hispanic population is expected to increase by 2%, and the Pacific Island/Native American/Other populations are expected to decline by 2%.

- Projected local population trends support the notion that Pennsylvania is an aging state. The average age is expected to increase from 40.3 in 2013 to 41.96 in 2023. Within the area surrounding the church, projections shows the 35-54 age range (Families/Empty Nesters) experiencing a 2.05% growth.
- Employment status of the population reflects 46% Blue Collar and 54% White Collar workers, with an estimated 8% unemployment rate.

Church Information & Demographics

FIRST COVENANT currently has 542 members (229 male, 313 female).

Number of shut ins		33
Non-resident (live outside the community, do not attend worship)		29
Younger than 18		72
Between 18-30		77
Age 31-50		93
Age 51-65		117
Age 65 and older		208
Number of Family Units		315
Family units with children under the age of 18		50
Family units with single adults living alone		unknown
Family units giving regular support to the church		250
Family units making pledges at the start of the year		167
Family units giving little to no support financially		60
Total number who have joined the church within the past 10 years		170
Total number who have joined the church within the past 5 years		74
Total number who have joined the church within the past 3 years		24
Average worship on Sunday morning		191
Yearly High	April 20, 2014	384
Yearly Low	July 27, 2014	132

Of our total membership, how many people (in addition to worship) participate actively in the leadership and ministry of the church by being involved regularly in one of the following activities or responsibilities?

Session		15
Deacons		24
Committees		37
Teaching	Church School	10
Men's organization		0
Women's Organization		0
Youth group		15
Choir	Adult / Youth	24/18
Ministry to shut ins		1
Ministry to the community		150
Any other activity important or unique to our church		20

Trends

	Church Membership	Church School Enrollment (From First Covenant records— Only includes Sunday School)
Current	12/31/2014 = 536	60 -75
3 years ago	12/31/2011 = 743	N A
5 years ago	12/31/2009 = 756	380
10 years ago	12/31/2004 = 869	394
15 years ago	12/31/1999 = 967	425
20 years ago	12/31/1994 = 994	N A
50 years ago	N.A. Prior to merger	N. A. Prior to merger

Financials

(Please see Appendix C and for details on our finances and campus.)

- Annual Finance Report
- Current Budget – including projected sources of income
- Record of all savings accounts

Stewardship strategy

During the past several years, First Covenant has changed its approach to stewardship. In the past, a stewardship ‘goal’ was established by the Stewardship Committee based on the needs of the budget and on its past giving trends. A shrinkage amount was also factored into account for a number of variables which could affect pledges from the membership.

In the past three years, the committee moved to a model heavily relying on actual income received during the previous year, as well as noticeable trends in giving. Based on this model, First Covenant has been able to much more accurately predict the results of the annual Stewardship Campaign, and we’ve done away with the old model and inaccurate formulas.

During the past 35 years, our finances have been based on what we hoped to receive through pledges and donations. Stewardship goals were rarely achieved. This strategy was not unique to First Covenant. To meet goals, First Covenant leadership often made an impassioned appeal to the congregation to help balance the budget – or meet other needs and requests.

The committee also used some of the strategies set out in Eugene Peterson’s *Stewardship for Vital Congregations*. Recognizing that stewardship is about more than just money, and therefore should be in the forefront of our minds year-round instead of just a few months each fall. In doing so, the committee recognized that relationships are key to a vital congregation. As such, ministry areas of the church are publicized to encourage members to become active in the life of the congregation.

Issues Raised by the Mission Study process

Focus on youth and families: Our congregational survey pointed to a lack of focus on our youth as a primary area of concern. Through multiple ways, the focus of making our worship accessible and workable for families has faded. This is evident through our young families' attendance at worship and involvement of older youth in our congregation.

We need to work together to make our worship and fellowship more accessible for our children, young adults and their families.

Apathy: The survey pointed to the fact that a large group of our congregation are waiting to see what will happen with our church before they fully commit to involvement. (The term "fence sitters" was used by Holy Cow Consulting.)

While we acknowledge, and to some extent, agree with this statement, the Session also felt it could be a predictor of great things to come for our congregation. By being "in the middle," there is a chance to move people to become more involved. We are seeing this as an opportunity.

Reach new people: In addition to energizing our congregation and making it a place where young families want to worship, there's a need to reach new people. Our focus on hospitality is a step in the right direction, but it's the first of many steps.

Strengthen members for ministry and leadership: We need to provide more opportunities for congregational input and to give our members a chance to step forward, use their God-given talents and be active in the life of the church through leadership.

Revitalize our community: We also need to take an active role in our community. We need to BE the church, live our Mission Statement and provide opportunities for our community to know Jesus by knowing him better ourselves – and putting our words into action.

Our Future Direction

As we are a church in transition, we do not have a set five-year plan for strategic goals. Our next permanent pastor will play a role in helping us chart our course, defined in-part, by the items below:

Neighborhood relevance: We have made strides toward having a stronger presence in our local community. Our work with Our Neighbor's Place, Sunday Suppers and international students and the student body at Gannon University and beyond is important to our mission. Our goal is to continue this work.

"But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Jeremiah 29:7

Plans for better usage of our building: Our church is breathtaking. We want to become better stewards of this resource so it can remain our spiritual home for the next generation. This means, in part, changing the way we think of our building and opening it up to more opportunities for ministry beyond Sunday morning worship.

“You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” (Matthew 5:14-15)

Connect with youth: Renew our focus on children, youth and their families. When children are baptized in our congregation, we publicly state that we will care for them and support them as a church family. With changes in our congregation during the past few years, we’ve had fewer families in attendance, and so our attentions shifted to other concerns like neighborhood outreach. We need to refocus energy on our youth and families without losing the momentum gained through neighborhood outreach. Recent staffing changes are a strong first step in this direction.

“Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you that whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:14-15)

Continue a focus on hospitality: During the past two years, First Covenant has intentionally become more welcoming to guests and members. We need to continue to discover ways to deepen this welcome. First Covenant’s history of change and its recent tumultuous past require that Session stays connected with the Congregation and continues to be transparent in its actions.

“Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles, and pray at all times. Share your belongings with your needy fellow Christians, and open your homes to strangers.” (Romans 12:12-13)

It’s important to note that as this Mission Study took place, the Presbyterian Church of the USA was tackling the issue of same-gender marriage, a volatile subject for many. We believe that some in our congregation are watching and waiting before committing.

Pastor Description

As First Covenant begins its search for a Pastor, the Session has identified the following core competencies integral to the chosen candidate. They are listed in order of importance, as determined by the Session.

Leadership Competencies

- Communicator
- Motivator
- Preaching and Worship Leadership
- Strategy and Vision
- Skills to Grow Church
- Teacher
- Interpersonal Engagement
- Organizational Ability
- Spiritual Maturity
- Can Connect with Youth