

**Narrative on the Health of Mission and Ministry
First Presbyterian Church of San Diego July 2012**

1. How has the Holy Spirit been evident in your congregation in the past year; through conversions, growth in the fruit of the Spirit, or other transformational experiences that make disciples of Jesus Christ?

God has blessed us with a physical and spiritual proximity to the San Diego Rescue Mission. Participating with them in their core mission – providing a 12 month addiction recovery residence with an emphasis on evangelism and discipleship – by membership on their Board, providing Bible studies in a member’s home for those who have “out” passes, hosting a Wednesday evening campus Bible study, welcoming many each week into worship and inviting some to offer their testimonies there, and establishing meaningful friendships, has been a constant visible reminder of the converting and transformational work of the Holy Spirit. We now share life together in responding to the call to discipleship. Some become members of the church and are now engaging in important ministry and even leadership. It has helped us to recognize the gospel at work and to remember its transformational power. Our celebration of God’s work among us has grown because of this partnership in the gospel.

The number of adult baptisms grows with our connection to this population and with the addition of others who are new to us and who newly commit to grow in faith.

A recent series of sermons on healing, several testimonies, and prayers for healing with the officers within the worship services has brought healing to many individuals, strengthened worship and love of God, and has been accompanied by spiritual renewal for many.

The fruits of the Spirit grow among us often by challenge. The constant presence – in worship and open fellowship events - of the urban poor, the majority of whom are homeless, requires of us a growing kindness, tests our patience, and produces compassion.

Difficult decisions by the Session reducing personnel costs and a dissatisfaction with one of our core ministries has revealed an anxiety about our future, our leadership, and communication. These things are opportunities for our members and our leaders to grow in grace and together and let the fruits of the Spirit grow among us.

The challenges remain. The challenge of change and its reception, and the corresponding sense of loss, in our 150 year old congregation is constant. The formative work of the Spirit is present throughout; more grace is needed.

2. How has your congregation extended itself beyond its bounds through the establishment of new communities of worship and discipleship, expanding the Kingdom of God?

This question was one of the more challenging to us, thus a very helpful question. The century-and-a-half history of our congregation as the first Presbyterian Church in San Diego has, by God's providence, positioned us as an early and continuing generative partner in the development of new churches. We are the mother, intentionally and not, of many of the congregations in San Diego Presbytery. Quite intentionally, we were the primary partners, sometimes with the presbytery, of the genesis of racial ethnic and immigrant congregations. The one Korean congregation, one of the two African-American congregations, and most recently the only Hispanic congregation in San Diego Presbytery were all begun on our campus, initially grew with our help, chartered as member congregations of the presbytery (the Hispanic congregation is completing their chartering this year), and now continue to strengthen with a fond expression of their gratitude for First's help in their early years.

But it is not clear anymore that this is the best model for us to develop new worshipping and witnessing congregations.

The International Community Church of San Diego is a gathering of 50 or so Asian college students and others who were first reached by a campus ministry (on three local campuses) which we support, and who have become a worshipping community with their own pastor and developing leadership team. They worship on our campus on Sunday mornings, sharing with us children's Sunday School, sometimes the fellowship hour and, once a year, a common worship service. This fall we celebrate together their 13th anniversary. ICCSD will not be spun off to become a chartered congregation in the presbytery, nor will they become an indistinguishable part of First. We will continue a partnership in the gospel, and are now exploring how we enter into a deeper relationship that is covenanted and brings together our different strength/gifts – First is sure, strong, stable, secure; ICCSD is fresh, flexible, and finding out still the rhythms of their congregational life and witness.

Icon Church, a newly formed worshipping and witnessing community, begins just now as a Sunday evening renter of part of the campus, with the conversations yet to begin on how we partner in gospel ministry and perhaps move toward a covenanted relationship.

An attempt earlier this year to combine neighbors who are homeless with college students for common worship and witness has not yet succeeded and may be abandoned for other, yet unknown, efforts.

A conversation with the Hispanic leaders in San Diego and First concerning initiating a second Hispanic congregation is at its earliest stages.

3. In what ways is your congregation seeking the welfare of the community to which you have been called; devoting itself to the poor, seeking justice, and living out the whole of the Great Commission?

We rejoice that God has given us the poor. Each Sunday afternoon we provide a Sabbath environment in our courtyard which welcomes and feeds over 250 homeless neighbors and the poorest of the urban poor. Called Ladle Fellowship it goes beyond being a soup kitchen by being a place for weekly reconnection among the poor and a space where we can enter a bit more into lives. Through this ministry, a weekly Wednesday evening discipleship class was established, where fellowship continues and evangelism takes place. Thirty or so homeless neighbors worship with us Sunday mornings and every new member class has homeless neighbors joining us.

This ministry has marked First as a leader in the Christian community and in the city in knowing, serving and sharing life with the poor. Our calling to be advocates of the poor in addition to being compassionate servants of the poor intentionally grows. We host and lead the Downtown Ministry Fellowship, a coalition of Christian churches and ministries serving the urban poor.

One Saturday a month, on our campus, we distribute 12 pallets of groceries to the nearby urban elderly, about 100 in number, including those who live in our Westminster Manor, a high rise subsidized building for low income elderly.

One Saturday a month, we distribute about 3 tons of groceries to 60 plus families (with about 250 individuals in those homes) who have a family member active in the military. This ministry – Operation Blessing - was begun this year, is greatly appreciated, and has captured the imagination of our congregation.

The past two winters (it's San Diego; use your imagination here) we have provided shelter in our church for 10 or so individuals each year whom we have gotten to know well and who we think may be near the point of being able, with sustained intentional help, to get off the streets and turn their lives around.

Our ministry to and with the poor challenges us in many ways and grows more complex. We are grateful for the opportunity to be exhausted in obedience to the command to love our neighbor.

Downtown San Diego, where we are located, is once again growing after a half century decline. Reaching these new neighbors – we are better at the down and out than the up and coming – is a challenge on which we only lately have begun to focus. Every established ministry is challenged to think of those not here yet.

An every week Saturday Jazz vespers worship experience, begun less than a year ago, with full preaching and communion every week, attracts, on weekly average 40 people, 30 of which are new to us, half of whom have never been active in a church. The challenge of presenting the gospel to our new neighbors is greater than our strategies at this point. Yet we are confident that the congregation will go where the gospel leads, even if we do not yet know ourselves how best to lead.

4. How are you encouraging people to allow God's Word to shape their priorities and actions, and to nurture constant learning and the life of the mind?

The Academy of Faith – the adult every week Sunday School - was begun last year, with five simultaneous classes from which to choose (7, six or seven week terms a year; 35 separate classes therefore). The classes are on 5 tracks – Hearing the Faith (Bible study); Knowing the Faith (theological formation); Owning the Faith (spiritual formation); Thinking the Faith (Gospel and Culture); and Living the Faith (How to...). The classes are often rigorous and always meant to challenge and direct. This has been well received, taught by an internal faculty, and attended by 100 members each week.

Internally developed Advent and Lenten studies for individual and group studies are serious and well received.

Our efforts at revitalizing a small group ministry have not been rigorous and have not met with new success. We consider establishing a church-wide sermon based small group ministry, yet hesitate. We are not content with the undeveloped nature of our small group ministry. Leadership is unsure on how to proceed, accountability within current groups is low, long established groups are usually closed to new members. The elders, as ministry leaders, will need to consider how to develop this ministry; the elders, as elders, have been challenged to become personally involved.

Bible study itself flourishes – we have many serious students and capable teachers of the Word. This is a Biblically literate congregation. Monday evenings host over 400 women in a city-wide Bible Study fellowship; early morning men's studies grow, and women's studies are very well led and attended. Morning prayer groups abound.

The Wednesday evening ministry grows in numbers and mission. It gathers some homeless neighbors, residents and recent graduates of the nearby Rescue Mission, families of our (pre-K to 8th grade) City Tree Christian School, and established members into a variety of classes for all ages that focus on discipleship and learning.

First is self consciously on the mission of learning what it means to love the Lord our God with all our minds.

5. How are you helping children and others new to the Christian faith to discover Jesus and grow in their understanding and love of God's Word?

We are tempted to answer "great – next question please". God has blessed us with a long history of teaching the Faith and faithfulness to the young for generations and with great success. Our Sunday School (with a truly remarkable Bible memorization ministry), VBS, and other children's programs are focused beautifully on evangelism and discipleship with God's Word at the center. The 4th and 5th graders are taught and invited to personalize their faith. We see new life begin there.

Youth ministry does well, with high parental involvement, a significant mission component where lives are transformed and faith is deepened, and a variety of activities, but lately with noticeable dissatisfaction as well. For financial reasons we recently reduced personnel costs including going from two full-time educators to one full-time educator who will have responsibilities over both children and student ministries. Morale is low. Maintaining and reestablishing excellence in our educational ministries in the next year is an obvious challenge. A renewed focus on disciple making as the commissioned and normative work of parents and members of the congregation is being developed. In the midst of this, nonetheless, we see the love of the gospel blossom among our teens.

City Tree Christian School focuses well on evangelism and discipleship throughout its curriculum and activities. The gospel gets into the home through the ministries and relationships of the school.

We have not developed any sustained effective ministry to our college aged students.

We do not have an established pattern of bringing youth into membership; there is no habit of confirmation classes.

We do not give ourselves high marks on assimilating new members into the life of the congregation generally, and are especially weak when they are new to the Faith. Formation in Faith and faithfulness is lacking. Lately we have turned our attention to this.

Our established members are well formed in the Faith and show this strength to the whole congregation including the young and the new. We want more opportunities to do this intentionally and effectively.

6. Describe the moral expression in your congregation – are you more like the world or more like participants in the values of the Kingdom of God?

This is difficult to judge and would require us to know the lives of more of our members and more deeply. We recognize that we all are sinners and we rejoice in the gospel. Humility must accompany our answer here.

We consider the moral compass of our established members to be aligned well and used often. We also judge that the moral gap between our established members and our newer members, visitors, and neighbors to be wider and widening.

Accountability for moral development is exercised best in small groups, we believe, and can best be fostered and perfected there. Yet we believe also that the pulpit must begin this work by announcing the terms of faithfulness to which we are called, and then inspiring all of us – established and new – to commit to the long obedience.

We have a highly developed sense of the vertical nature of truth – God reveals it to us in his Word by his Spirit; we do not trust the horizontal – moralities invented by our contemporaries.

Serious questions are asked of those being nominated to the offices of the church, and articulated standards of behavior are required of all those holding office.

7. How is your congregation intentionally unleashing the ministries of women, men, and people of different ethnic groups who are experiencing God's call?

Women: yes, and with gladness – holding office in equal numbers with men and leading in a very wide variety of ministries, not least of which are the teaching ministries, reaching out to new families, developing ministries to women, the pastoral ministry, and as members of staff.

Men: we are not sure of the question. If the development of gender specific ministry is being evaluated, men lose the contest.

Racial/ethnic ministries: yes, but more by partnerships with others – young immigrant congregations, ethnic specific ministries downtown and in the presbytery - and less among our own members.

City Tree Christian School has a greater diversity in its families, to some extent by way of carefully applied church funded scholarships, than does the congregation. Being in ministry with these families broadens us and gives us some hope of being more representative of the city ethnically. Our common activities and ministries grow each year.

8. How is the idea of ministry as the joy and calling of every disciple evident in your congregation? How are you equipping people to represent Jesus more effectively in their respective professions?

Our volunteer spirit is strong among a large and dedicated leadership core. They are exemplary and often well equipped. Willing workers are not difficult to locate and recruit. Development of this attitude and practice among newer members does not lag far behind. Involvement in ministries to the poor, short-term mission trips, teaching ministries, and in worship is high.

The sense of this work, though, being a divinely called ministry is undeveloped among many. Seeking, discerning, and committing to a call is not the language of the congregation; volunteering, helping, doing my part is.

Equipping for ministry within the ministries of the whole church, including those ministries that we do together and which are outwardly focused, is good. Intentionally equipping for individual ministry at work, school, places of leisure and elsewhere has not been a focus, and remains undone.

The nominating process is thoughtful and prayerful, exercising a careful mutual discernment. Officer training and examination is intense and intentional.

9. Illustrate the commitment of your congregation to global evangelism and discipleship, including examples of where you are engaging and with whom you are partnering.

Qualifying as both a local and global mission, our sustained, intergenerational commitment to helping the Christian community in Mexico, just two hours away (we are 13 miles from the border), by going often to build homes, lead VBS, worship and witness, and deepen friendships illustrates a missional calling for many members.

New mission in Ghana – beginning with a partnership with an established Christian clinic, revitalizing the local K-8 school, building homes for teachers, and planting a Presbyterian preaching point which hopes to become a congregation led by a new pastor we supported through seminary - in one village, with five visits in three years, illustrate new and growing callings.

Our global missions budget is largely the support of lifelong missionaries that are sons and daughters of our congregation.

10. How does your congregation understand commitment to the larger church through our connectional relationships within the Body of Christ?

Our pastor has long led evangelical witness in the PCUSA and encourages our thoughtful, even if often problematic, connection to the denomination. We are committed to lead not leave. Our participation in San Diego Presbytery is very high. Our connections to other Christian ministries, fellowships, and congregations grow with our involvement and leadership in downtown ministry.

These questions strike us as helpful in that they helped us to celebrate what God was doing among us and those things for which we need more grace.

Two broad areas of self-examination, we think, could and should be added.

The first concerns the immeasurable matters of congregational unity, morale, sense of vision and mission, and general peace. Lately we, as the Session, are concerned about these things. The growing presence of the poor, external to the campus and in the ministries of the church, has not been equaled by growing resources or membership to match the challenge. Financial resources are strained and personnel cuts have lately been announced. Changes in congregational life have been received as blessings and as needed by many, and as loss by others. Spring meetings in homes (15 in all; attended by over a third of the membership) were well received and give us confidence of a profound love of and commitment to the church and Savior among the membership. Yet, an ennui exists.

The second concerns the very measurable matters of membership (50 consecutive years of membership decline, only now ending it appears, but leaving us very differently sized than what the majority of members with fondness remember); worship attendance (without the new attendance of Jazz vespers, a noticeable decline, leaving 200 worshipping twice – 400 total - each Sunday in a sanctuary with a 1000+ seating capacity); finances (down about 10% during this recession), and the aging of the membership (we have more members in their 80's and 90's than in their 20's, 30's and 40's combined). These matters are part cause of the first concern, of course, but of themselves require serious discernment and action on our part.

The dominant, almost exclusive, metaphor of the congregation for itself is The Household of Faith. God has blessed us with a strong internal fellowship with many, many established members who are devoted disciples of the Master. Our prayer is that our dis-ease is a forerunner to new leading of the Spirit of God that positions our church to be blessed to be a blessing to the next generation of those living in and near San Diego, indeed the world.