

Presbyterian Church in Morristown
Congregational Discernment Process April-October 2021

Chapter 1: The Process

In April 2021, the session of the Presbyterian Church in Morristown (hereafter PCM) appointed the following persons to the PCM Discernment Team: Marilynn Harris, Rodney Lawrence, Craig Dodd, Chris Cotnoir, Molly Rauter, and Leslie Dobbs-Allsopp as staff. The Discernment Team gathered for Retreat 1 on April 24 to plan the Timeline Event and the Demographic Study. The Discernment Team decided to offer meetings and events in person, rather than on Zoom. PCM people have loved being back together in person, and that has led to fruitful conversations.

The Timeline Event was held over the course of 4 weeks in May and June. There were Timeline Event gatherings on Sundays after worship, and there was one abbreviated gathering for children and middle schoolers during their midweek program. Church staff also added their events to the timeline. There were about 70 adult participants, plus 15 children and youth.

The Discernment Team gathered in early June for retreat # 2 to plan for the Storytelling Season, while we were still working through the Demographic study. There was spirited discussion regarding whether to study the area surrounding the Parish House at 65 South Street, or the Church on the Green at 57 E Park Place. The church's buildings are about 1/3 of a mile apart, in quite different neighborhoods. In the end, the team purchased a Percept demographics report for the mile radius around the Church on the Green. The Discernment Team went on an extended walk around the neighborhood surrounding the Church on the Green on a Sunday afternoon in June. That area is a juxtaposition of diverse commercial and lower income housing and new high-end condos and apartments under construction. The team also walked the neighborhood surrounding the Parish House one rainy afternoon in July. The neighborhood is a mixture of retail (South Street) and restaurants and very expensive housing right behind the Parish House.

The Storytelling Season events were a series of rich and wide-ranging conversations. There was some duplication of Timeline Event participants, but the Discernment team successfully encouraged new participants to sign up as well. We held 4 Storytelling Season Events throughout the last two weeks in July. The Storytelling Season was held in Sheffield Hall in the Parish House, where the timeline was still up on the wall. There were about 40 participants.

The Discernment Event with the session and Discernment Team was held on August 24th in person, with several session members attempting to join via Zoom. One of the learnings of this Discernment Process has been that PCM is not yet well equipped to offer hybrid events in our spaces. Discernment Event conversations were wide ranging, from what PCM appreciates in a pastor to the reliance on the endowment to serving the significant young adult population in the area. Even though it was the end of August, two thirds of the session made the commitment to be present for this conversation. Members of the Discernment Team met the end of August for Team Retreat #3, to review the Discernment Event, and to plan for the Visioning Retreat in Sept.

The Visioning Retreat was held on September 25th, with all but 2 session members participating. The Discernment Team and the senior program and worship staff were present. It was challenging to do this work in a large group setting of 30 people. The Finance Team took the Financial Health Assessment and led a discussion on the results at the September session meeting. The session will discuss this report at a special called meeting on October 12th.

Chapter 2: Our Timeline

The discernment team held timeline events with members of the church on May 9th, May 12th, May 16th and May 23rd. The events were well attended and representative of the membership with participation from our children and new and old members alike. Each event began with a reading from Luke 10, chapters 1-12. After the reading, participants were asked a series of questions reflecting on the passage. Small group discussions were facilitated by the church leadership and members of the Discernment Team.

Next, the groups were instructed to reflect on their positive church memories, identify times when the work of the Holy Spirit was evident and to reflect on sad or difficult times. Each of these areas of reflection were represented by pink, green and blue sticky notes, respectively. A timeline was created representing key moments in the life of the church. Members took turns placing their sticky notes on the corresponding decade for their memories.

Most of the memories focused on the last 25 years or so, but memories, both good and bad went back to the 1960's. The more difficult times of the church (1980's, 2000's) came during times of transition, though members pointed out that they came through those times of transition by coming together. Good times were experienced during times of strong pastoral leadership, especially during the Tom Sheffield and David Smazik eras. Evidence of the Holy Spirit was cited throughout the life of the church in both big and small ways. A summary of each decade follows below.

1960's, 70's, 80's and 90's:

Pink:

1960's – women's circles, Couples Club and Fellowship

1970's – Getting married here, Children's baptisms, Children's sermons in the church; Tom's sermons

1980's – Choir/Circles; being ordained as a Deacon

1990's – Involvement in Circles, Memorial Garden; Christmas Eve Service most popular in town; choir; Tom Sheffield; baptisms; PCM Nursery School starts Grace and Bible stories; weddings; Circle 12; Bazaar; daughter's wedding with Tom; my children getting a wonderful start at PCM Nursery school; Being welcomed as a visitor; Outreach focus

Green:

1980's – Homeless Solutions, at Howard House; Creation of Clothing Bank; Cantante Omnes; Youth Mission; SCEEP; Spring Hills, Clothing Bank

1990's: RISE trips; growth in faith while serving as a tutor

Blue:

1980's: communication was lacking during a transition and divided time at the church, but we came together

2000-2009

Pink:

Dave C starting Small Groups; welcoming and meaningful services; Greeters; Small Group; AAA; Kenya trip; FFP; 275th Anniversary; singing in the choir; Sunday school; confirmations; being a confirmand Mentor; Operation Love; Church being involved/invested with people in need; Being a part of a small Group; coming to Pre School at PCM; Meaningful sermons; welcoming environment.

Green:

Teaching PW Bible Study; Katrina relief; Holiday services; Small Groups; Being a tutor at SCEEP; Operation Love; Nursery School has growth and resurgence under Katherine Henckler; Participation in

MLK Celebration; Small Group Bible Study; Stewardship Campaigns; Calling to Be a Stephens Minister; Small Group; Mission trips.; MSM Graduation held at PCM.

Blue:

Long Interim Periods and Slow Processes lead to difficult times for Church; lack of leadership; Transition times; interim Pastor resigns; Interim Period between Dave C and Dave S; Time Period after Tom left; Too many clergy changes between 2001-2010; all those interim pastors; Poorly matched Head of Staff who failed to see the needs of the church; My Dad was trapped in NY on 9/11, but made it out; Tom S leaving after a long and successful ministry; Karen Scott's firing; disintegration of Nairobi Partnership; challenging interim time; church declined after Tom left; Joanne Miller left; lack of pastoral care for an active PCM member.

2010 – Current time:

Pink:

Music and choir; Collage Concerts; AAA; Fellowship; Julie R; Music Program; Chili cook offs; Dave S's leadership; 10 AM service and fellowship hour; Acolyte Program; Welcoming church. Mission trips; Community that Matters; VBS; Sunday School; weddings and Baptisms; 3rd grade Bibles; Jazz Vespers; support during family illness; Confirmation; YSOP; Church Renovations; Jazz Vespers; More young families; Baptism, Marriage, Confirmation; Tom S- Pastor Emeritus; ROGS tour; Sunday School; Friendships through Midweek; Chili Cook off; Newton Presbytery Youth Gathering; Small Group's; Mr. A.P.; Ed's service as a Bridge Interim; PCM Library; Advent Wreaths and Doughnuts in the parking lot; technology to keep church together; book club with Matt and Undoing Racism; Adult on line education; Outdoor Services;

Green:

Capital Campaign; Undoing Racism; Loaves and fishes; MAP/SCEEP; 8 AM service; Julie R and Mary Jo's services; St. Virgil's and PCM's choirs coming together; Matthew 25 church; Pandemic Life; Matt's music program; Back Yard High school mission; Keeping Jan's closet open; Table of Hope; Mid Week (live); Sense of Community; Ed; Dave's leadership; Stewardship for MEF; Dave visiting during illness; COVID forcing us to listen to new ideas and ways of worship; renaming Jan's Closet.

Blue:

Circles dissolve due to aging members; decline of ROGS; Lack of Pastoral Support during illness; Anti-Racism program with Rendell never went anywhere; loss of office staff; too many P/T employees; Loss of Julie R;; loss of Mary Jo; Corona Virus; no high school mission trip to help people; no graduations; no services; no Bell Tower Trips, loss of members to lack of in person services; the pandemic pressure; need to communicate; too much PC USA involvement; Presbytery too bureaucratic; Dave's leaving; Collapse of relationship with Rendell; People dying from COVID.

Chapter 3: Who are the People in our Neighborhood?

PCM Demographics Study

Overview

- The Discernment Team chose to study the demographics within a one-mile radius around the Church on the Green while walking the neighborhoods of both the Church on the Green and The Parish House. We chose to purchase a Demographic report from Percept.
- The purpose of the demographic analysis was to determine who exactly are our neighbors, and whether the congregation is servicing and connecting with those communities effectively.

Key Data Points

- The development of high-rise, mixed use buildings have increased over the last several years in the neighborhood, resulting in higher values and rents. These developments have attracted millennial demographic which currently makes up 32% of the population.
- Households with children comprise 9% of the population, with about half of those being single family households.
- Almost 400 members of our congregation are 56 and older
- There are 2800 single family housing units within the study area and the balance of the 8640 housing units are multiple dwelling units. The median rent for a studio apartment is \$1900 and the least expensive single-family home listed for \$300,000
- The Hispanic/Latino community is projected to grow by about 560 people over the next 5 years, while the Black population will see a decrease of around 170 persons over that time. The White population will see a decrease of around 225 persons, while the Asian population will grow modestly by about 50 persons.

Key Findings and Observations Summary

During our walk through the neighborhood, we were particularly struck by the juxtaposition between the large high-rise mixed-use buildings going up in the neighborhood and the empty store fronts on the Green and along the side streets downtown. On the one hand, it is vibrant with many restaurants, but empty store fronts make it abundantly clear that many small businesses and restaurants did not make it through the pandemic.

As for the data, we were not particularly surprised at the large percentage of the Hispanic and Latino population, but we were surprised at the large number of millennials who now live in the neighborhood. While neither of these groups are worshipping with PCM, members of our church are actively involved in 12 programs to support our neighbors in need. Additionally, our Youth/Youth Adult Director is reaching out to encourage millennials and other groups to participate in available programs at the church. As we continue to have further discussions with the congregation, it will be important to focus not on the disparity between the PCM community and the surrounding neighborhood, but rather on what we can do as a congregation to continue to serve the surrounding neighborhood and to provide ways to further engage with PCM that *aren't necessarily tied to Sunday worship*.

Chapter 4: Storytelling Season

The Discernment Team hosted 4 Storytelling Season events during the last two weeks in July. These events were held in person in Sheffield Hall in the Parish House at 65 South Street, where the Timeline was still displayed on the back wall. A total of 40 participants sat around large round tables for a series of wide-ranging conversations.

What did we learn and hear from the Storytelling Season?

At all 4 events people deeply engaged with Dwelling in the Word. Themes included being sent out in pairs, trusting God for the journey, do the work/ministry that God gives you, and do not worry about the outcome, Jesus delegating the work of ministry to the 70, even he didn't try to do it alone, wondering who is the church for, is it our job to minister in here or out there, shaking the dust off and moving onto the next ministry opportunity. There was general consensus that the ending is harsh!

We learned that our people are reflective. We heard stories of how difficult interim times have been over the last 40 years. There was reflection about Dave Carpenter's pastorate, with agreement that he was not the right "fit" for this congregation at that time, and yet gratitude was expressed to Dave Carpenter for bringing small groups into the life of this congregation. There was a lot of reminiscing about Tom Sheffield, whose pastorate is identified with vibrant times. People expressed gratitude for Dave Smazik's gifts for community building within the congregation and connecting the congregation with the community. "Dave made us realize that we CAN."

We heard people consider the opportunities inherent in the large millennial population in downtown Morristown. There was considerable conversation around how to reach that population, how to partner with them in ministry. There was acknowledgement that even though our neighbors may not ever walk into our building for worship, we are still called to serve our neighbors. We have low income neighbors in need of support, and we have millennial neighbors who seek community and opportunities to serve.

These were some of the first in person conversations our people have had with one another since the beginning of the pandemic. People were reflecting on the importance of "flesh", of being together in the same space. People were thinking about what they cherish in this congregation: long term friendships, music in worship, fellowship and gatherings around food, the need individuals have to be of service in Christ's name. People appreciated the time and care that went into the pre-recorded worship services, and people are now glad to be able to access worship via live streaming.

Throughout the Discernment Process, and especially during the Storytelling Season, there was ongoing conversation around reliance on the endowment. What we raise in pledges is less than the annual budget. Our personnel expenses are high, as are expenses for building upkeep and repair. Currently it is possible to make up the budget differential by tapping endowment interest alone, but this is not a sustainable pattern. Several folks raised (again) the question of how long we can be good stewards of all of these buildings.

Several biblical metaphors were repeated across these conversations: the loaves and the fish "we seem to be able to make it work", the church as a rock in this community, this congregation as a deep rooted tree with many branches, this congregation is like the fable of blind men and the elephant, sometimes we only "see" our own particular little part and not the whole.

Chapter 5: Where is God Calling Us?

Summary of learnings from Discernment Event

Summary of Conversation on emerging needs of the community/neighborhood

The Discernment Event was held in person on a hot night in late August. Despite the time of year, many session members participated, including several who joined us online. We learned that evening that we want to ensure sufficient infrastructure to allow for hybrid meetings. The group participated in Dwelling in the Word, and reviewed write ups from the Timeline Events, Demographic Study, and Storytelling Season.

A large part of the conversation centered around the demographic study. 32% of the population in downtown Morristown are millennials (Gen Y). How might we reach them? They are interested in service opportunities, and they want to make the world better. They are not moved by church buildings. How do we connect our significant outreach and service opportunities to those neighbors? How do we continue to care for and support the immigrant families who are our neighbors? We want to serve and be connected to all our neighbors, whether or not they ever worship with us. Our immigrant neighbors are facing job losses and rising rents. Might we share our facilities in a meaningful way to partner with other groups who are connected to our neighbors? We did all this renovation in the last decade: who is it to serve?

The hoped-for qualities of the new pastor were an additional topic of conversation. These include strength in the pulpit, administrative skills, people skills to know congregation members, and the ability to work with varying demographics within the congregation. The pastors who flourish here act as catalysts for congregation and community. The eventual PNC will be hosting the Leadership Capacity Event, which will delve more deeply into the next pastor's qualities and skill sets.

There was a spirited conversation about financial resources. Some folks who remember lean times think we are too reliant on our endowment to balance the budget. In a good year we raise \$850,000 in pledges, but the budget is \$1,350,000. We are the stewards of a substantial and growing endowment that has benefited from recent generous gifts. The endowment currently earns sufficient interest to balance the budget. Staffing and building upkeep expenditures continue to grow. How long can we take care of two very large buildings plus three others? What do we need in the way of buildings and appropriate staffing in order to live out our calling?

Chapter 6: What is Our Vocation and our Vision?

Vocation statement: Engage all people in faith, service, and community

During this discernment process, it became clear that we want to continue to focus on serving and reaching out to our diverse community, and we want to reengage members who have stepped away during the pandemic.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. Romans 15:7

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. John 13:34

Engage all people in faith, service and community

Visioning for the future

- Our vision is that in the first six months, we will seek out and hear the stories of the people in the congregation who are not currently engaged. We will identify two groups in the Morristown community to better understand their mission and hear their stories.
- One year from now, we will have actively re-engaged congregants and we will be working with two community groups.
- Three years from now, we will have reordered our human and financial resources to serve the needs that have been identified from these conversations

Action Steps:

1st 6 months:

- Identify members who have not returned to church post COVID and contact them: session and deacons to coordinate this outreach (this is a huge project, there are 860 members on the rolls, but only 75 in person in worship)
- Schedule small group meetings live/via Zoom to listen to their stories and concerns
- Identify and meet with 2 community groups to determine their interests and current areas of need: staff members and Outreach Committee will identify the community groups and coordinate these conversations

1st year:

- Continued contact with re-engaged members, using their input to reshape programming and activities
- Youth and Christian Ed committees will organize young adult/young family activities at PH to reconnect with this population.
- Utilize space in Parish House (SSH and Sheffield Hall) to hold community events with identified groups

3rd year:

- Session Approval will be secured for our new partner community groups to have access to church buildings and resources.
- Re-engaged members will experience renewal of their ties to the congregation

Notes from the Session Meeting 10/12/21

The session of PCM met via Zoom to discuss, receive, and approve this draft report. Discussion centered around the Vocation Statement and Action Steps. It was noted that even though the session had voted to become a Matthew 25 Church late in the fall of 2019, the congregation knew little about it, because the planned “roll out” in early 2020 didn’t happen due to Covid. It was noted that PCM is now very involved in Morris Area Together, which is an expression of Matthew 25 commitments, but there was agreement that it is time to “recover the Matthew 25 initiative.” “Engage all People in faith, service, and Community” is our call, whether the “people” are worshiping with us in person or watching us online. These are different audiences who need to be engaged “in ways that work for them”. One session member remarked that it is time to learn who exactly is worshiping with us online, and whether they give to the church. The session voted to receive and approve this report and voted to commend and thank the Discernment Team for their good work.

Chapter 7 Miscellaneous

Financial Health: The Finance Team did the Financial Health Assessment, discussed the results in their meeting, and then led a conversation during a session meeting. The only “yellow light” was for participation. We have instituted an online giving platform through Breeze, but only a small percentage of members utilize it. Thankfully, giving has remained strong during the pandemic. Throughout this process there have been multiple conversations regarding reliance on endowment interest to meet budget shortfalls. Personnel and building(s) maintenance expenses are high. Over the course of this process several people have raised concerns about the long-term viability of stewardship of multiple buildings. The endowment continues to receive major bequests and is growing steadily, and the church is in overall good financial health.

We could not connect with MissionInsite. They did not return multiple phone calls. Percept, Inc. not only returned phone calls, but spent about 2 hours on the phone helping us to discern what our study radius would be, and even sent beta test reports. Once those parameters were determined, the report appeared in our inbox within 20 minutes.

The Discernment Process lasted throughout the spring and summer, and those who participated found the conversations meaningful. This was a great way to get our people back into our buildings and talking with one another after 15 months apart.

We utilized Dwelling in the Word in small groups at round tables, rather than in dyads. Most of our meetings took place around tables of 8. They responded to this text from Luke at every gathering, moving from the surface reaction of “that’s so harsh”, to really talking about what it means to move out into the world in mission.

The Visioning Retreat Vocation Statement exercise was challenging with a large group of 30 people. We thought it would be counterproductive to break into smaller groups to work on multiple Vocation Statements. The process was a little messy, and it took 2 hours, but in the end we got there.

The Discernment Team agreed that the eventual PNC will be tasked with the Leadership Capacity Event.

Respectfully Submitted,

The Discernment Team: Marilyn Harris, Molly Rauter, Rodney Lawrence, Craig Dodd, Chris Cotnoir, Leslie Dobbs-Allsopp

