

## **Report of the Vision Team to the Session and to the Congregation**

### **From New Beginnings to Vision Team**

In 2011, the congregation at Arlington Presbyterian Church embarked on the *New Beginnings* process culminating in the meetings of small groups over six weeks in May and June. At the end of the series of meetings, each of the small groups tallied the members to choose among different futures for APC. Three stood out:

Mission Redefinition – 19

Parallel Start – 14

Restart - 11

We had a congregational meeting on September 25, 2011 and decided to pursue Mission Redefinition to see if we could develop a consensus around a new mission for APC in South Arlington. We decided that if we were not successful, we would next turn to explore the Parallel Start or Restart futures. We agreed that in the Mission Redefinition process everything would be on the table, including the future leadership of the church. We decided that we would pursue Mission Redefinition as if we were starting a new church and that it would involve two major efforts:

1. Defining our beliefs as a faith community on the basis of the following questions:

Who is Jesus?

What is church?

What is salvation?

What is service?

What is evangelism?

2. Active and continuous engagement with the surrounding community.

Thirty (30) members of the congregation took part in the retreat on October 20-21, 2011, where we reached some common views of the answers to the basic questions. Those answers are on display in the sanctuary and are summarized here:

#### **Who is Jesus?**

Jesus is the Son of God who embodies unconditional love, removes the obstacles between us and God and who through His death and His raising gives us new life. He is a radical teacher who shows us how to have a meaningful life with God—the impossible right way to live.

#### **What is church?**

Church is a community of ordinary people who follow Christ, who welcomes people to join them in the journey of faith and moves into the community carrying God's love and reconciliation.

#### **What is evangelism?**

Evangelism is the way the church demonstrates to others the power and presence of God in communal and individual lives.

## What is salvation?

Salvation is true gift; unconditional love through Jesus Christ that frees us from sin.

## What is service?

Service is the way the church is the eyes, ears, hands, feet and heart of Jesus Christ in the world.

We also began our walks outside the walls into the community.

The Session took further steps with developing our faith commitments and engaging the community and we had further conversations around this at our next congregational meeting on January 28. After the congregational meeting, the Session decided to hire an outside coach familiar with both the *New Beginnings* process and with the PCUSA (USA) Planting New Churches process to help us work through the next steps. Session began our conversation with our new coach, Rev. Shannon Kiser, on April 22, 2012.

On May 4, 2012, interested members of the congregation met with Shannon Kiser to talk about the next steps on our Mission Redefinition journey while Sharon was on sabbatical over the summer. Everyone in the congregation was invited to join the effort. The only requirement was serious commitment to follow a set of common practices along the journey. Seven members of the congregation agreed to form a Vision Team that would take the work that had been done over the fall and winter in our faith statement and engage in an intensive process over the summer. The team members are:

Judy Robb  
Jon Etherton  
Susan Etherton  
Linda Peebles  
Kristine Gabster  
Lorraine Gardner  
Michelle Lanier

Kristl Hathaway and Mary Helen Harris have also been active in working with the team over the summer. Kristl has been producing the Catch the Vision newsletter each week and handling other communications.

The Vision Team set out to listen for God's direction and to discern ***for whom our hearts were breaking in South Arlington and why.*** We all agreed to table any prior ideas we might have had around the "what" of our discernment (specifically, affordable housing) and focus on the "who" and "why." We also agreed that nothing would be assumed and everything was up for consideration, including leadership.

Each Vision Team member committed to do the following:

- Daily Bible Study – Using the framework that Shannon provided at the May 4 meeting with the daily readings from the *Sacred Space* website.
- Regular prayer- seeking God's will for Arlington Presbyterian Church, surrendering our plans for God's plans, and –at 9:38 each day- praying for field workers for the harvest (Matthew 9:38).
- Community conversations – at least once a week to have a substantive conversation with at least two people in the community.

- Participate in the Vision Team meetings (usually two times per month).
- Provide a weekly report to the rest of the team about the insights from the scripture reading and prayer as well as a report on the community conversations for that week.
- Serve in turn as an announcer at Sunday morning worship about the work of the Vision Team for that week so that our journey would be transparent to the congregation.

### **The Vision Team journey over the summer of 2012 and beyond**

The Vision Team did not embark on our summer journey with much beyond commitments to follow our common set of disciplines, to share and to listen. We listened to God in daily scripture reading and prayer, in conversations with the congregation, with one another, in the silence, and in the conversations with our neighbors. We allowed ourselves to be led in faith in very small steps.

We talked to our neighbors. We met them in their workplaces. We talked to them on the street, in stores and at festivals, the farmers' market and the BBQ truck in the church parking lot on Saturday mornings. We met with numerous community leaders and non-profits, such as the Columbia Pike Revitalization Organization, the Greenbrier Learning Center, the Arlington Partnership for Affordable Housing, AHC, local schools, local libraries, Just Neighbors, AFAC, A-SPAN, Doorways and the Shirlington Education and Employment Center. We served our neighbors by volunteering within these organizations and we allowed ourselves to be available for our neighbors in spontaneous service as God showed us the needs.

On August 26, members of the team shared their encounters with the Holy Spirit, with one another and with our neighbors at a luncheon with our congregation. Each of us who spoke had an emerging sense of the neighbors for whom our hearts were breaking and whom we are called to serve and why.

### **The three elements of our emerging vision**

In our discussions along the journey, the Vision Team has returned again and again to the same three elements of an emerging vision for what Arlington Presbyterian Church is to become. As these became clear, we also found them aligned with God's Word for the church and its individuals.

The elements and supportive Scripture are:

1. A congregation of disciples

Growing as a community of disciples of Jesus Christ has to remain our main focus as we move into the future. It will define who we are in our relationships with our neighbors. This will involve continuing to discern what a committed community of disciples might look like -- e.g., a majority of members engaged in Bible Study, participating in worship, serving in the community, supporting the answers to the five questions posed above. We are called to live out the Great Commission as described in the Gospel of Matthew (below). If we take this seriously, what will it look like and how is that Good News to our neighbors?

"Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." - Matthew 28:19-20

## 2. A crossroads and gathering place in the community

Arlington Presbyterian Church is in the center of many different communities in South Arlington. Establishing a welcoming meeting place in the context of redeveloping the property in some manner to provide affordable housing could allow us to serve our congregation and our neighbors with a special gathering place for community and service. In addition, we will consider how we might continue to build relationships with other non-profits in the area including providing use of the building to organizations such as SEEC, Just Neighbors, Greenbrier Learning Center, AA, etc.

"Thus says the LORD:  
Stand at the crossroads, and look,  
and ask for the ancient paths,  
where the good way lies; and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls." - Jeremiah 6:16

## 3. Affordable housing

Although we had tabled this as part of our initial considerations, it became clear in our conversations that affordable housing was one of the major needs of those with whom we spoke and of our South Arlington community. We spoke to many business owners, public employees and working people who are unable to live in South Arlington because market rate rental housing is out of reach for them and their peers. There is widespread institutional, financial and political support available for affordable housing development in South Arlington, but dwindling area to provide it. In fact, while we were engaged in our visioning, Arlington County passed a Neighborhood Initiative that specifically calls for a focus on, and commitment to, affordable housing in our area. The nature of housing has changed over the past three years and the problem will only grow as economic development in South Arlington progresses. Some of our property could serve this need. In addition, there are organizations who work to provide housing for more marginalized segments of our community (elderly, developmentally disabled, mentally disabled, homeless transitioning to homes). We are hopeful that some portion of our property could serve this need as well.

"Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' - Matthew 25:34-40

Similarly, we believe that these three emerging elements are an expression in South Arlington in 2013 of the calling of the Church as expressed in the Book of Order (F-1.0301) of the Presbyterian Church (USA):

*F-1.0301 The Church Is the Body of Christ*

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world (1 Cor. 12:27–28):

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.

The Church is to be 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. The Church lives in the present on the strength of that promised new creation.

The Church is to be a community of love, where sin is forgiven, reconciliation is accomplished, and the dividing walls of hostility are torn down.

The Church is to be a community of witness, pointing beyond itself through word and work to the good news of God's transforming grace in Christ Jesus its Lord.

### **Recommendations**

The Vision Team believes that it is time to move to make the emerging vision a reality. We recommend the following:

1. The Vision Team needs to be discharged from its work to move to the next stage. But to preserve the energy and the working of the Holy Spirit that we experienced in 2012, a new team of similar size, the Future Church Team, should be formed with anyone who is willing to commit to daily common disciplines similar to those adopted by the Vision Team. This new team should be given a budget and discretion to pursue implementing the vision wherever it leads and should be empowered in dealing directly with NCP on the property and other issues that will have to be addressed to move forward with redevelopment, to speak for the Session, consistent with the Book of Order.
2. The new team should be supported in forming three smaller sub-teams to work on making each of the three elements of the vision a reality. The teams should be charged with doing as much as we can now with what we have rather than waiting for the conclusion of a long-term redevelopment plan to get started.
3. The small group process led by members of the Vision Team needs to be strengthened as a way of bringing our congregation into the conversation at every step and involving everyone in the work of bringing the vision to pass.