

Interim Report of the Vision Team “Hallmarks of our Next Chapter”

To the Hills Church Congregation:

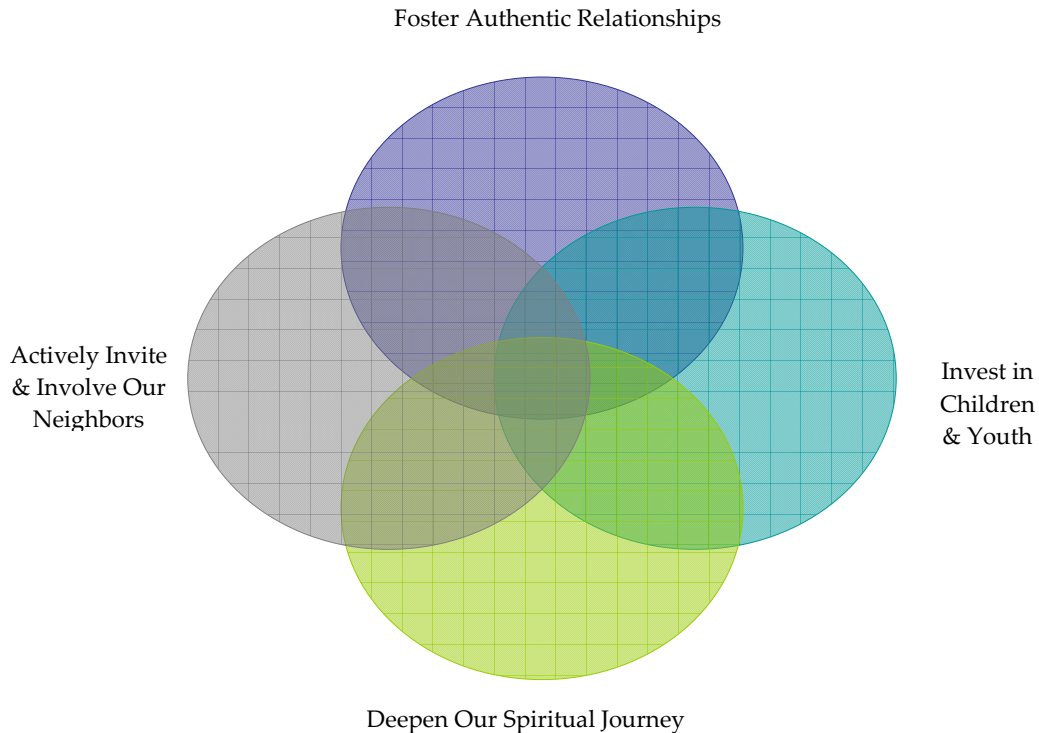
This “working paper” represents the Vision Team’s current synthesis of what we have learned from our work to date, including conversations over the fall months, the three-minute survey, Next Step Café and the Vision Team retreat as we as a congregation, seek to discern:

Who are we?

What are we here for?

What great things do God and the congregation dream for our church?

From our wealth of input we have discerned that your hopes and dreams for our church, God’s hopes and dreams for us as a congregation, include the following four components:



These four components are closely related to one another and often overlap. Some elements represent a deepening or extension of *what we already do well*. Others represent *a shift of energy* in less familiar directions. In addition, our conversations suggest related questions that may be the basis for further important dialogue, for instance, “What do we mean by serving others or further deepening our relationships with people outside our church walls?”

Last September in Day by Day, Matt wrote that although we bring diverse beliefs to this visioning process, “the important thing is that we listen to one another carefully as we work with God to write the next great chapter in the life of this great church”. This paper is a recording and reflection of what we heard from those many conversations. We are now in the process of sharing this working draft with various groups around the congregation and we need to listen to you again.

Please take a few moments to read the Interim Report of the Vision Team “**Hallmarks of our Next Chapter**” and share your thoughts with us by filling out the short [feedback form](#) at the end. Your input will guide our steps as together, “we write the next great chapter in the life of this great church”.

Mimi D’Angelo and Mary Hill Canavan on behalf of the Vision Team

I. Foster Authentic Relationships

A major strength of the Hills Church is the web of deep, authentic relationships among its members and friends. We value these relationships highly and see the strong sense of community as an important part of the Hills Church “identity.” This sense of relationship and community, which for the Hills Church is also intertwined with our spiritual life, has various components, and it offers both opportunities and challenges as we seek to build even deeper and more meaningful connections with each other and with God.

Where We Are Now:

- We have a “taste of it” – real experiences of community – yet we yearn for more.
- God is in the exchange, the connections among people. “We experience God through other people.”
- Our shared worship strengthens our ties to each other. Music, communion, rituals and traditions are all important to build and maintain community.
- Our church is a source of strength, refuge, and support. “You are not alone.”
- We experience tangible and intangible support through hard times – love, concern, and empathy as well as a meal, a prayer shawl, a ride.
- God’s presence makes this community different from others to which we belong.
- Small group settings foster deeper relationships. For some, this has been committee work. For others – on-going small groups for learning, service, reflection. For others – one-time activity like the Pumpkin Patch. One-on-one connections also important, and some of these develop out of the small group setting. Fun, food, and hospitality are part of the mix.
- God’s presence comes in the act of “doing things together,” with being with others in a common effort and purpose.
- The church offers a special and in many ways a unique opportunity for intergenerational relationships.

But

- Sometimes we get too busy doing things that don’t matter.
- Some members feel isolated and left out.
- Much of this happens incidentally
- These relationships are primarily “inside our church walls.”

Possibilities We Might Embrace:

- Be more intentional in creating opportunities to build and deepen our relationships.
- We need a variety of opportunities – including various structures (short-term groups, one-shot events or activities or tasks, committees, on-going small groups) and various contents (educational, social, task-oriented, service, spiritual sharing.)
- Shift in committee culture – more community building among members, reflection on why we do what we do, allow faith connections.
- Redefine “participation” in church life in more relational terms and less in terms of what work/jobs we do. Allow and value more “Mary time,” recognizing that tasks need to be done and represent meaningful experience for many members. [“Mary time” - See Biblical Image section.]
- Articulate the “why” in what we do. Is the nurture of relationships involved in this activity or group? How is it nurtured. Could it be?
- Encourage broader participation – ask and invite, not just offer.
- Expand our opportunities for intergenerational activities and relationships.
- Outside our walls, our Outreach Ministries will strengthen the relational, personal component, both among our members and with those they serve.

What changes might this require?

- Change our primary form of participation from “committee” or “doing a job” to “being with each other” and “experiencing each other’s company.” This is the promise of more “Mary time” in our lives.
- Changes in committee culture and/or the ways committees carry out their current responsibilities.
- Changes in governance structure. We don’t want to add yet another layer of responsibility or participation, no matter how meaningful, to lives that are already busy ones. We might need to subtract some things to allow room for others. We need to respect our members’ full lives and their varying places over the life cycle.
- There is risk in opening ourselves up to each other and to God, in sharing our life experiences and our vulnerabilities; it calls for courage. For many the Hills Church is already a place in which they feel safe to share and to listen, but we as we move forward we are called to be more intentional in creating a structure and a culture that defines the church as this sanctuary.

Biblical Image – Luke 10:38-42:

The story of Jesus' visit to the home of sisters Mary and Martha captures the Visioning Team's sense of the tension between relationships/experiences and tasks/responsibilities. Martha attends to her work, while Mary sits at Jesus' feet and listens. When Martha looks for help, Jesus answers that "Mary has chosen the better part." This story resonates with our own sense that listening to God and to each other is what sustains us and that we will be able to find a proper balance between "Mary time" and "Martha time."

Luke 10:38-42:

Now as they went on their way, he entered a certain village, where a woman named Martha welcomed him into her home. She had a sister named Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying. But Martha was distracted by her many tasks; so she came to him and asked, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her then to help me." But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things; there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her."

II. Deepen Our Spiritual Journeys

Where are we now:

- Diverse religiously - Our congregation comes out of a broad variety of religious traditions. Prior to their Hills Church involvement, some of our members were not shaped by any particular religious tradition. "(We have)...respect for different opinions....this is our uniqueness."
 - 3 Minute Survey – "Before you started coming here, what type of congregation did you attend?"
 - 34% Congregational
 - 16% Catholic
 - 42% Other Protestant
 - 8% Other/ Non-denominational
- We experience our faith and God through
 - connections with others (small groups, short-term and long-term projects)
"For me, it's a combination of strengthening our personal faith, but then strengthening our work in support of others."
 - moments of strife or life and death challenges
 - worship, music, sermons, traditions
- We are less comfortable talking about our individual relationships with God or about our faith experiences

- While we desire to live out Christian values and pass them on to the next generation, there is uncertainty about the source of these values. It is difficult to name our common ground.
- Tension: We cherish our religious and theological differences, yet we long to deepen our spiritual journeys *in community*. “This fellowship is different than any other you can belong to. The impact of God in the experience makes it unique.” “Experiencing God through other people – God is in the exchange, the connection.” “Community experience is more powerful than one we can have as individuals.” “I really like congregationalism in that we are not told what to do, but the ministers are there to help us figure out for ourselves.” - “common quest” – “We have ministers to teach us.” – “...longing to be connected to God.” - “...longing to be closer to God.”
- Wanting to talk about “things that matter” – Willingness to go deep and wrestle with questions

Possibilities we might embrace:

- Continue to be a church which welcomes religious and theological diversity - Door wide open – bring yourself and your experiences
- Celebrate that our spiritual journeys are very unique. Continue to clearly affirm:
 - We need many opportunities for spiritual development and faith enrichment.
 - Our members learn in different ways, we bring diverse perspectives to church, and need to engage spiritual growth opportunities in different ways at different paces.
 - room for plurality of views
 - Offer opportunities which combine both adult learning and adult fellowship (experiences “like Junior Fellowship” i.e. – a space in which to both learn about the core elements of our faith, while also learning about our individual faith experiences and life stories)
- Increased pastoral engagement and pastoral care by our lay members,

What changes might this require?

Educating the congregation to recognize their spiritual needs - to ask, “Where is God?” – This may require feeling vulnerable and having the courage to take a risk. We have to help people, through personal connection, become aware of their spiritual needs. So, rather than look to the experts for the answer to our spiritual questions, we will enter into searching conversations with one another about “things that matter”.

- As a congregation and individually, as we do the work of the church, we can genuinely articulate why we are part of this church family

- Keep reminding ourselves, in all settings of the church, that we are doing God's work.
- Invite people into a variety of programs to talk about own spiritual path and learn about the *particular* theological and historical groundings of this place...what is the thread that holds us together? In a structured way we could offer:
 - a foundation of knowledge about our Liberal Protestant/Mainline Protestant heritage, and the congregational tradition
 - a basic literacy in key Christian concepts
 - a course of spiritual development that helps us see, in our own lives, the relationship between the everyday and the spiritual.
- Take a look at what we are asking our members to commit their time to currently – streamline method of committee involvement so that our primary way of engaging the church is rooted in a variety of faith experiences, rather than in the business of “running the church.”
- If we are going to ask ourselves to delve more deeply into our faith, we need to provide ourselves with the space and time to do so.
- Will require long-term commitment to put this in place.
- Must approach this with an attitude of give and take (we learn from each other)
 - sharing and learning as individuals and as a church
 - church as a whole needs this to grow spiritually
 - two-way relationship/transformation
- Motivating Factors:
 - How will I talk with my kids about faith?
 - We experience God in times of crisis and challenge, how can we celebrate and rely on our faith outside these two areas?

III. Invest in Children and Youth

Where we are now:

- We are an aging congregation, yet *“young people = the life of the church.”*
 - *“We need more young families in the church... to refresh itself. We need to spend time attracting young members, the next generation, not people our age. We need to maintain a balance of members across all generations.”*
 - *“I like seeing all the youth activities at the church. It brings people together. “*
 - *“More and more children! It's a great strength.”*
- Members experience and enjoy the opportunities to have two-way relationships with younger and older generations.
 - *I “love the blend of age groups.”*
 - *“the youth trust our older members and love to interact with them, and it is a two-way street”*
 - Kids say part of their greatest hope for the future of church is being *“partnered up with elders in the church... same thing with younger kids.”*

- We want to give our kids the spiritual foundation they need to deal with the challenges of growing up.
 - *"This is where my kids were taught values and morals in the Christian tradition, a certain code of ethics."*
 - *To **really believe** in God. To have Him in kids' heart - can help with crisis*
 - *Church is "my third parent. It's hard to distinguish between what parents and church taught me, unified effort to make me a good person."*
 - *I want my kids to make "decisions and choices based on what God would want them to do."*
 - *"Church is a crucial part of growing into maturity – doesn't generally happen except in church. Nowhere else is the word "God" really used."*
- We have intentionally invested in staff for youth and families.
 - *"Jim's doing a wonderful job."*
- Our youth say the Church is a *"safe place"* and they feel *"accepted"* here.
 - *From senior youth fellowship: "It's okay to ask questions"... "You're accepted here"... "the best thing about church is that it's welcoming – you will have friends here"*
 - *When you are with your friends and you feel you can express yourself freely; in school people judge more; here it's more comfortable."*
 - *"Church can be a safe place where people want to be together to deal with the challenges of growing up, grow up with a circle of friends here."*
 - *"To have social networking separate from school, a safe place from peers."*
- We appreciate our youth mission and service trips.
 - *Our kids learn a lot about others and it "changes their world view."*
 - *Members are proud of the kids and enjoy hearing about their experiences.*
- The youth look forward to and feel faith around our traditions.
 - *They often say traditions are when they feel their faith most strongly in church. They make "me feel like I'm part of something bigger."*
- We have had some success with kids programs that have come from passionate individuals, such as Hand bells, Kids-to-Kids in India, and the Pumpkin Patch.
- Parents say they have trouble getting youth to church.
 - *Kids say they are "worried about homework, early in the morning I'm tired, if my friends aren't there."*
 - *Competition with other activities including sports and family time.*

Possibilities we might embrace:

- Attracting and engaging a larger youth community
 - *We need a certain number of kids involved to keep momentum going – critical mass*
 - *We need to attract new families to the church – to maintain size and spirit of church- rejuvenation*
 - *"My best hope for that is to have the youth program that brings in all the kids and some of their friends. A place that is a draw for spiritual belief, but also just a place for stress relief away from today's kid's world."*
- Involving more non-parental adults.
- Continuing to develop interesting & engaging programs and fun events for youth.
- Involving more kids in service activities.
 - *"We learn a lot about ourselves when we meet others not like us."*
 - *Kids say "activities I do here make me feel good/doing the right thing – vs. school, school is for yourself vs. doing for others."*
- Enhancing Sunday School curriculum and making it easier for all members to teach.
 - *Making the curriculum more interactive and engaging, easier to prepare.*

- Offering opportunities for youth to go deeper into their faith.
 - Currently can only offer basic activities to “plug them in” to church (Come & See, Grow).
 - Need more opportunities for youth to develop & act on their spiritual faith (Develop, Disciple, Lead).
- Providing a youth minister who is present in the overall town community and accessible, not caught up in tasks.
- Viewing youth programs as a great opportunity to engage and interact with non-members – bring a friend.
- Providing support, seminars, and resources for parents.
 - Every survey says that parents are far and away the most trusted advocate and biggest influence on teenagers.
 - Great potential to engage other parents in wider town community.
- Offering more opportunities for parents to care for and connect with one another.
 - *“Comfort knowing we’re (parents) on the same page as to morals & values as we raise our children together.”*
- Keeping youth involved in the church after Confirmation.
 - High school kids have much to offer the younger kids. And we want to keep our connection through the college years as well.
 - Kids say *“I hope I can keep my circle of friends into college and beyond; church friends are different from school friends, less drama!”*
 - I want my kids *“to be part of a larger community that will have continuity as they transition from elementary school to middle to high school.”*
- Connecting with kids outside of church.
 - *“More “touch points” at different times, not just Sunday morning.”*

What changes might this require?

- Basic direction is the right direction – investing more \$ and more people including staff and volunteers.
 - Can’t rely on one minister to do tasks and relationships and spiritual.
- Challenging adult members to participate in helping with youth which would mean less committee time and more youth time. Would change what participation means at church.
- Meeting and engaging with other church’s youth groups.
- Communicating and coordinating service projects so that multiple generations can do service work together
- Being open to new ways of worshiping and welcoming kids at service.
- Having parents be more committed to getting kids to church.
- Supporting kids and parents to invite peers to church programs.
- Encouraging committees to include youth in their activities.
- Dedicating building space for youth – parsonage.
- Being creative in finding ways to get more staff – grants, after college service year programs, etc.

IV. Invite, Welcome and Involve our Neighbors

Where we are now:

- The Hills Church has a great deal to offer new members. The membership experience has been so positive for so many of us. We want others to share in this experience.
 - We have all of the wonderful attributes discussed in the small group conversations and during the Next Step Café. Community, diverse theologies, worship service, music and many more.
- We want the church to thrive.
- The declining church membership and attendance over the past several years, combined with the age demographic profile of the congregation are cause for significant concern.
 - Church attendance has been in decline, down 4% since 2004 and 16% in the past ten years. 2007 saw an increase of almost 20% but 2008 declined again by 9%.
 - Pledge units have steadily decreased in each of the past five years resulting in a 16% decline over the period.
 - The number of new members joining the church, (individuals, excluding confirmation class), has rebounded recently. In years 2004 – 2006, an average of 10 new members a year joined. In 2007, there were 32 and in 2008 there were 20.
 - One third of the “congregation is over 60 years of age; one third are in their 50’s; Only 10% are under 40. (From 3-Minute Survey)
 - A sub-committee of the Prudential committee that is working on a long-range financial plan has modeled out future membership scenarios, which indicate that if no action is taken and we continue along our current path, the Hills Church will be in a severe financial situation within 5 years, putting the church’s survival in jeopardy. (From Prudential sub-committee)
- Efforts have been made to invite and welcome new members to the congregation, yet it hasn’t been enough to reverse the downward trends.
- We are blessed with a tremendous range of assets that will help us grow the church. This includes a strong core group of members, a strong community, especially among long-time members, a wonderful facility, good location, a talented congregation, a re-emerging youth program and new and younger pastoral leadership.

- We have enjoyed some success in attracting and impressing potential new members. Most recently, the 4 o'clock Christmas Eve service had 400 people in attendance. It was focused on children and families and all could participate.
- We had some limited success with the Christmas Eve invitation cards.
- The youth program has been gaining traction under Jim's leadership.

Possibilities we might embrace:

- Becoming "active inviters".
 - Define our invitational outreach.
 - Cultural – we think we have something to offer – think it should attract others – haven't been active inviters
 - Can be more intentional – who is willing and able to be a good inviter. Enable with training, resource materials
 - Always build "invitation opportunities" into a broad range of church programs, not just worship. Be creative!
 - Adult to adult, adult to adult for child, child to child
- Creating and executing a formal "marketing plan" for the church.
- Research what people outside the church are looking for and implement programs to better meet their needs
 - Who are our "neighbors?"
 - Why have people chosen to join a church?
 - What are other churches doing?

What changes might this require?

- A cultural shift to become comfortable with membership evangelism.
- Leveraging proven business processes in a church environment. ("Market research"; A "marketing plan".)
- Becoming comfortable promoting our activities more broadly. Crank up the PR machine.
- A willingness to make changes to our worship service, and the overall "Sunday morning experience" of visitors to make it more "baby/child/youth/family friendly".
- Reprioritization of resources, (staff, budget, activities) to items that will attract new members. (i.e. children and youth.)
- The congregation needs to be open and supportive of changes, even the ones we don't personally care for, to support the long-term health of the church.
- Adopting of an "experimental" culture that supports trying new ideas, integrating those that work, passing on those that don't but encouraging the effort behind all.

