

## **HOLY CONVERSATIONS on MARCH 12, 2006**

This document consolidates reports from the 14 conversation groups held after worship on March 12, 2006, at Bradley Hills. Worshipers were given a number from 1 to 15 assigning them randomly to a group for conversation following worship. There was no group 1; the few participants in that group combined with other groups.

After initial sharing on the question “**How have you experienced God’s presence in the past five years?**,” group participants engaged in conversation over the following questions derived from the Bradley Hills Mission and Values Statements and to consider a long term goals:

1. How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?
2. How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?
3. One of our values is [each group was assigned one of the BHPC values]. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?
4. Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to become within 10 years.

### **GROUP 2**

**Jan Hauck, Facilitator Value: Joy**

#### **How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

- Make core groups within the whole church – communities within the larger community (This came from a newer member who said she is having a hard time meeting people).
- We have a terrific community! There is joy, energy, friendliness (came from an old-timer).
- One person said she feel a need to meet more people.
- Core groups to help each other during the week; attract young families (mentioned as something we lack, but would be nice to have).
- The young mothers group is nice but it needs constant emphasis-renewal.
- We should have a list of members by geographic area.
- Older members could help the young families/young parents (this came from a new member who is older)
- TASTE program – how do working parents get their kids there? We could have a pool of people to pick kids up for programs like this.
- Many members are caring for elderly parents. They need help too, a friendly visitor so the caregiver can get out of the house to run errands.
- One member felt the role of deacons could be expanded or explained more clearly. She said many people are reluctant to call Deacons for help, if the need seems small. Call deacon as liaison to find people to help you with transportation, babysitters, etc. A database of people and how they can help.
- It is hard to staff caregivers for taking charge of kids

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

- Infuse more praise and joy into services with music. This member comes out of service intellectually stimulated but not always feeling stimulated in the heart. Raise the passion. ( she suggested praise music).
- At this member's old church, a praise team met twice a month on Saturdays to practice (to provide praise music on top of what church choir did).
- We could have a Gospel Singers group.
- Use different musical instruments, e.g., African, to draw young people in. To grow we need to draw from urban community.
- Give stipends to young university students to practice Sunday mornings before church, then they sing with the choir.
- We need improved language skills (i.e., Spanish) to draw in outer immigrant community.
- Can we take experience of BJC relationship and take it into the world? The Muslim community?
- We need to remind people that Muslims are like us and need to be encouraged with a community like ours to work together.
- Make BHPC a center for all people...Jews, Muslims, to get together in the world.

**One of our core values is JOY. What could BHPC become if we lived that value? Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

- We can't have just one goal.
- Whatever we focus on , we have to have a sense of balance.
- Open-mindedness.
- Play with our strengths – intellectual; home for lots of different faiths.
- Be a beacon for coexistence for faith and reason in this community. We could be known for this. Illuminate lantern at night as a “beacon” for the community to see.
- Environmental concerns – how are we going to turn around our situation so we continue to have this earth – global warming.
- BHPC should be a leader in the community for environment. Draw in youth. Mission trips to inner city and overseas. Make young people citizens of the world.
- Getting young people involved in taking care of God's creation.
- We need to be doers not just intellectuals.
- Help the environment by poverty reduction- education, small business (funding), grass roots efforts, like the Uganda mission.
- We could be making better use of our relationship with BJC; for example, talent shows are great way for BHPC and BJC to interact.
- We helped found Bethesda Help, Bethesda Cares, Community Ministries. We need to do more advocacy... trying to organize our congregation to call politicians to effect the root issues which give us some of our poverty situation.

- We need to recognize the changing structure of families' lives – time is an issue for families; competing priorities and activities, like Sunday soccer games. We need a new strategy to reach people.
- Find a way to reach poorer pockets in our county.
- Distribute the advocacy newsletter from Becky more widely among church members.
- We need advocacy emails (more than we need Susan's sermon emails.)

**Group 3                      Ed Hummers, Facilitator   Value: Honesty**

In general, the discussion was quite open with the greatest concern being the state of the children's program. The following are the comments presented by the participants:

The church is doing "pretty well" with lots of opportunity for outreach, but you "have to grab it."

The distance between home and the church and time constraints make participation in the outreach opportunities difficult. The BHX is important as an informational tool but there needs to be a greater effort to familiarize new members/visitors with the opportunities available, that is, something more than a brief scheduling mention. Greater visibility might increase participation.

The general consensus was that the many opportunities to participate do not cause unreasonable fragmentation and that we are not trying to do too much. There is more interest in doing more.

At the previous church of one of the participants, "covenant groups" were formed as a way of getting to know one another better to become a more joyful community. The covenant groups were informal and grouped by activity or interest and not geographic.

The discussion of covenant groups included the following: the CG could be used as a meant to an end or to further a goal; the CG are analogous to a fraternity or sorority with people of like interests banding together; and the CG compare notes on how to develop or achieve goals.

What seems to be missing in the church is a "sense of passion," something to get really excited about. Passionate members can be identified and work together to take advantage of the wide spectrum of passions within the congregation. It was noted by one of the participants, that a church with which she was connected grew because it focused on matters for which there was a strong passion in the congregation. The passion resulted in better and stronger programs, which in turn attracted more members.

Greater advocacy on social issues is one of our Christian obligations. We live in an inherently political environment. It was acknowledge that advocacy on issues is likely to alienate some in the congregation.

Strictly following the lectionary may limit the ability to focus on issues most important to the local community. Living Christ in our own lives perhaps by greater concentration on observing the 10 Commandments.

We need to broaden our outreach by utilizing more effective methods of communicating and recruiting. The medical and military communities are likely candidates for new members. Passionate congregants will do a good job of communicating by word of mouth.

It was acknowledged that there is a need for new and/or additional leadership, which will result only if the potential leaders have a passion for the activity.

While growth was recognized as important, it was acknowledged that growth would place a strain on the building and staff.

Parking was mentioned as a problem but it was noted that crowded parking also was an "advertisement" that something worth joining was going on.

The social period before and after services was recognized as a good opportunity for congregants to get to know one another better.

It was recognized that the most important area of growth was to attract young families with children. The families would only be attracted by a vibrant program for children of all ages. Lack of discipline of unruly boys in the middle school class was a problem. The "Godly Play" program was a good start but not a lot of parents have become involved.

There is a strong need to improve the youth group participation and activities. Some suggestions were:

- Facilities may need upgrading
- Leadership that can relate to the youth is needed, even if we are required to recruit and hire young adults to add excitement and relevance to the program. "Hire someone who can do the job right." The youth program at Fourth Presbyterian was noted as a model. Use of parents who may be burned out is not the answer.
- Issues that are important and of interest to the youth of different age groups must be identified.
- The issue ought to be reviewed by congregants with experience, including reviewing what is successful at other churches.
- There ought to be the periodic involvement of kids in worship; e.g. music and drama.
- A goal of 100 kids in the youth program should be our goal for the next 10 years.
- Perhaps more interaction with other churches in the area might be helpful.

The closest thing to a big, audacious goal was the building of the best youth program that would encourage young families to join the church. The second closest thing to such a goal was the identification of a passion that would excite a great number of persons that would result in new and additional leadership. It was interesting that for all of the activities of the church, none was identified as a passion.

**Group 4****Bob Reutershan, Facilitator Value: Integrity****How can we make Bradley Hills a more joyful community of spiritual friends?**

Our conversation focused on welcoming. All of the “newcomers” expressed the opinion that BHPC was very welcoming when they were visiting and immediately after they joined the Church. The one visitor in our group was very impressed with the Pastor’s responses to several emails but was disappointed that she had not been greeted during coffee hour and that emails she sent to other BHPC members were not answered. There was a consensus that members should make more of a conscious effort to greet visitors and new members and that something should be done to encourage this behavior. There was some concern expressed that ushers should make sure that they are on time for their duties so that there always is someone available to greet people when they walk in the Church doors. Another suggestion was that there should be “de-greeters” -- ushers at the doors to say goodbye to worshipers as they leave the building. There was consensus in the group that it would be nice if BHPC could exude the joy of the churches (evangelical) that are growing but still maintain the accepting attitude that we have now. Concern was expressed that our program of education for youth desperately needs more adult participation (teachers) and that if our children are not schooled in the Christian traditions, our community will wither and die.

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

Two major themes arose in our discussion of this topic: witnessing and the value of small group discussions. There was agreement that small group meetings provide wonderful opportunities to really get to know others in our midst and also provide a great forum for witnessing to one another about how the Spirit works in our lives and for sharing our faith in things unseen. There was a suggestion that, because of the frantic schedules of many of our members, we should explore the possibility of connecting with each other through on-line dialogues. Some concern was expressed that BHPC needs to provide a way to help people own the Scriptures for themselves. Our visitor suggested that we should provide more opportunities for individuals to join with other “progressive” groups and individuals. She was very moved by her meeting at BHPC with a member of a Christian Peacemaking Team.

**One of our values is INTEGRITY. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

We should “be out there,” even if it is controversial. We should live Christ-like lives during “the rest of the week” and give more time to God. There were opinions expressed that we tend to be less tolerant of fundamentalist Christians than we are of followers of more traditional Christian faiths and of members of non-Christian faiths; if we were truly to live with integrity, that would not be the case. There was concern that our discourse sometimes is not as “civil” as it ought to be and that, if we were more true to our value of integrity, our discourse would be more civil. We need to be better at communicating our view of God’s grace. We should not give up on our “intellectual” approach, but we need to find an “energizing serendipity” (which probably happens in small group meetings).

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

We still will be associated with a community of Jewish believers. We will bring in more Muslims and Evangelicals so that we can try to understand each other (but be sure to get someone like Jim Wallis, not Pat Robertson). Hopefully, BHPC will become a place where everyone who walks through the door feels welcome and connected.

**Group 5                      Yoshi Sei, Facilitator    Value: Compassion**

**How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

New member who has been 2 ½ years in the area talked about how church members got connected at her old church. Old church strongly encouraged new members to join small groups; dinners for 7-8 were held once per month for 4 months for new members to encourage making connections. Groups then had more social opportunities to get together on smaller scale. This is what they do in small groups after church in Asia as well -go to lunch or dinner together. The pastor found if you have friends in church you come to church more often; he said the church had grown much more over the years. This church was a little smaller than ours was but their attendance was high (+/- 80%). Not only were there the small dinner groups, but also had groups in similar life stages, e.g., newlyweds without children. It was especially helpful for new members.

Other ideas...

Whole church potluck but in a smaller church (100 members)

Smaller groups shuffled up and met in peoples' homes

Large church divided up communities of attendees by geographic area---organized events at church or meetings outside of church by geographic area. In this church we tried doing this 10 years ago -how did this work out? Maybe because so many mothers work -no time

Parents who don't go to church but bring kids to kids' programs (e.g., the BHPC Nursery School) - how do we liaison with them?

*Publicity outreach happens but can we strengthen it?*

Could nursery school put on performance during 11:00 service so parents would come? Be flexible in times of programs. How about youth minister?

Share performances when we do joint BHPC/BJC services

Small groups of committees (e.g., ushers) get together

Form matrix of types of groups and shuffle them, e.g., life stage/age; Kids/ages; geographic; vocation; church committee.

Sports programs would make it more fun (grown ups too), golf after church, volleyball, bowling, skateboarding for Christ

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

Small spiritually focused groups (Gail Brown' Sunday evening group); Morning study group; Lenten groups; groups possibly using a trained facilitator are very helpful

Help build connectedness.

Mission projects and opportunities – international, national, and local – then choose which level of need you want to serve.

Do high schoolers know about opportunities?

Target specific demographic groups and build from there.

Fourth Presbyterian has huge youth program: “youthful” focused youth program with rules about behavior.

**One of our values is COMPASSION. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

Spread peace, spread Christ's word as a focused goal that trickles down through all activities. (e.g., the example of Christian athletes).

Be living disciples – examples to the community and the world.

Understand what the youth need and then build programs to meet those needs-maybe mission maybe--?

Create a sense of belonging of connectedness of community.

Saying “thank you” –sense of gratitude builds sense of importance.

Refueling and re-centering so we can show compassion rest of week.

Welcoming new neighbors -Do we greet them and welcome them? Who are our “neighbors”?

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

A place to seek peace in our lives (also part of compassion)

A Place for Empathy – Sanctuary of caring and healing for each other as well as people afar who are calling for help. A pool called Bethzatha (John 5:1 )

Build Sunday school attendance by 50% – bring in young parents with meaningful programs that speak to their burning issues and they will bring in kids to Sunday school.

**Group 6**

**Becky Wagner, Facilitator Value: Community**

**How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

Some struggle with the community part – feeling caring and support

Found it hard to break into BHPC: signed up 3 times to join church and wasn't contacted

Challenge with the processes – visitors or potential members can find BHPC's processes daunting; it's not always easy to know how to become involved.

Deacons could be a big help in connecting people but some asked, “Has your Deacon contacted you?”

How aggressive should we be with new members?

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

Becky noted that her new job gave her permission to talk about her faith.

BHPC is strong on people over 50 (actually the person said “older people” meaning over 50!) and people with nursery school kids – doesn’t do enough for singles and middle aged folks.

Do we reach out to older members at times when the power is out or there’s another crisis? An evangelism retreat would be a good idea and talk to other Presbyterian churches about what they do.

Could we incorporate our Christian values in all parts of our work life (e.g., people who work in personnel)? How do we incorporate those values without crossing the line?

Share stories of our day to day life (not just foreign trips but everyday things); this generated the conversation: “It’s great that we have people going to Africa, but I’m not. Lift up examples of work and mission in our own community and with each other at BHPC.”

Move to focus on the “proclaim” piece of the statement

One member noted he was unaware of BHPC’s involvement in local mission activities.

**One of our core values is Community. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

We should be a counterpoint to the “buy-sell” consumer culture – here there is an expectation that you don’t necessarily get something back when you give – unlike a purchase.

Make our volunteer opportunities something rewarding to do so. you don’t feel attacked by the needs of the church.

What are the implications of a “low-commitment” church?

Churches like 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian are “too much” – successful, but you’re only a number there

Some questions about Susan’s sermon reference to “simplify” – it was explained that it meant for us “do less but do it better”; don’t do it just because it’s been done in the past. Focus on people feeling over stressed. Focus on a few things with more people involved

Give more focus to fewer programs: we could be more connected to people’s problems ... we should focus in a few areas and leave other things out. We don’t have to maintain the past but we need to remember it.

Regarding the role of the deacons – looking at individual needs of the congregation – are they exhausted?

Deacons – there should be a specific process for them (e.g., how to connect with others, etc)

(This is interesting because some of us know they are well trained and some are overworked.)

Are our volunteers overwhelmed?

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

Integrity is the most important – because it means doing things. We can involve people – all 700!

How could we light those lights? : Better focus in activities and programs; do some things (not all) and do them well and build on them.

Session's job is to decide what's important – need to trust the guidance of the Session.

Balance – taking time and giving time; people feel too much giving, not enough receiving.

Numbers of young people in church and in the 20-40 age group: how can we be more multi-generational: small dinners? Book club? Softball team?

Activities that appeal to the “wanted” groups often are not successful.

How are we different than the Rotary Club and other such groups? – We are Christians and how does that make a difference? Answers:

Worship – tie in with activities, begin and end gatherings with prayer

Music – children's music example – tie this in with the content of the music and spiritual aspect

Our faith underlies anything we do here – that faith supports and sustains us – without even having to say one word.

Bring community together in events (e.g., going to Nationals game)

Hardest thing for the task force – the message of simplifying – what does it look and feel like?

Our church - strong sermons

What we want in worship is to be challenged

Pastor says what people need to hear, not necessarily what they want to hear (Mega-churches too often focus only a “feel good” message)

I don't come to church for any single purpose – the church is my family, it is my church.

We should still focus on our historic strengths – our long history of these values:

Education

Music

Outreach to the community

## **Group 7                      Melissa Busch, Facilitator    Value: Compassion**

### **Vision - BHPC is a place where people connect:**

A general theme was connection. People who are in small groups appreciate them and feel that their participation in them help them connect them to Bradley Hills and wish that more people would participate.

Similarly some commented that the value of the connection was the ability to share thoughts about faith and spiritual experiences.

Ideas for connecting included suggestions such as a couples club which was the way that some of our older members got connected in the church. Others felt that this might only work for a particular type of group and that we need to find other ways as well. It was recognized

that you have to have the people energized to do this and the volunteers to make it happen, but people were not able to provide concrete suggestions for how to do that.

**Vision - Bradley Hills is a place that mixed traditional and contemporary music:**

There was a talk a vision of a contemporary worship that included ore more contemporary music; there was an assumption that the music would be easier to sing and get more people involved.

**Vision – Bradley Hills is a place with an active and energized youth program:**

More youth participation is needed. We want to see more people coming to middlers and seniors. Perhaps the timing of the current programs may be the issue. One of our participants indicated that the senior-high program is OK but could be much more. Would like to see Bradley Hills strengthen its youth program and get more people.

Many of us came back to the church when we started having kids. That would imply that we could be a place to build families and help to impart knowledge of the Gospel and help kids have positive feelings about the church.

There was also discussion of having more children participating in service as a way to engage them. But some people disagreed that having kids participate is a good thing; ‘The children are cute but they do nothing for me spiritually’.

Children need to get exposed to church. Several indicated that they came back to the church when they started having kids. That would imply that we could be a place to build families and help to impart knowledge of the Gospel and help kids have positive feelings about the church. Those with elementary age children were very pleased with what is currently offered at Children’s Worship at 11 am. In fact they observed that perhaps the church school decline is a result of a strong 11:00 am program.

There is an issue about the older kids in the Children’s Worship (around 10 years old) being too old for the program (and are stuck with smaller kids) but not yet old enough for middlers.

People like doing things with their kids; young families participating with their kids is a good way to build community.

Someone remembered that Martha Stevenson (the educator in the 1970's) would use the youth coming back from college to fill in the gaps in leadership as way to continue their involvement and model participation to the younger ones.

**Vision – Bradley Hills is a place where compassion is demonstrated externally and internally.**

Activities such as the AIDS concert demonstrate our compassion; it raises money and awareness for people and gets BHPC’s name out there.

Youth are involved in mission work and there was a suggestion that this might be a way to grow participation; youth are looking for a way to participate in the larger community in a positive way.

Montgomery County is evolving and Bradley Hills can help meet the needs of the community around us.

Being invited and welcomed – being asked. Not only about being asked, need to know each other when we talk about we need to recognize the needs of others. Compassion needs to start with each other. Part of being compassionate is to be compassionate to each other that can be helped by helping people become more aware of the church and the people at the church.

Being compassionate evolves from an internal light that is shining; we have to shine ourselves and serve as an example.

We need to find other ways to connect; time and opportunity to connect with meaningful ways (but no one had concrete suggestions).

**Vision – There are things at Bradley Hills that are working well.**

Strong preaching (especially Susan's) draws and keeps people. Several participants expressed that it was Susan that originally drew them to BHPC (through the website – reading about her and her background) and it is Susan that keeps them coming back week to week.

Being listened to – someone shared a comment that they had written down on a recent comment sheet that they would like to hear the carillon more often and now it's being used more often; nice to feel like someone responded to the suggestion.

**Vision – Bradley Hills reaches out in new and innovative ways.**

We talked a little about the new emails from Susan and Scott (favorably) and thoughts about maybe a chat room or the ability to download podcasts of sermons.

The website is working, people finding out about the church that way.

**Group 8                      Andrew Wolvin, facilitator    Value: Hospitality**

**How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

The general sense of the participants is that BHPC is a joyful community of spiritual friends. People are seen to connect through various BHPC educational, worship, and mission activities so that we have smaller communities where people find spiritual outlets and social support. One participant suggested that BHPC should explore ways to connect with other churches and groups to do more local mission projects. He notes that we tend to overlook the vast number of people in need in our own community (homeless, for instance) to focus on the needs of the people of Africa. The group also suggested further exploration of ways to engage the youth in

BHPC projects. But one participant cautioned against spreading ourselves and our resources too thin; we may be going off in too many different directions already.

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

One participant suggested that we need to do an all-church inventory of how BHPC individuals and groups are already doing this. BHPC should offer opportunities for individuals to come together to share what they are doing in their personal and professional lives to communicate their Christianity. One participant noted that he is wearing the green Darfur ribbon at work, and this has prompted many colleagues to join in the effort. He also noted that we should explore ways to join with other church congregations in mission projects. The group also observed that BHPC has exceptional music and drama programs that could be used for greater community outreach through the performing arts. And the group suggested the need to explore ways to engage kids of all ages to participate more effectively in music and drama projects.

**One of our core values is HOSPITALITY. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

The group perceived BHPC already to be living the hospitality value. There is a strong sense that BHPC is a welcoming, connecting community. The group consisted of a variety of people: one long-timer, one who has been at BHPC for 10 years, one for 2 years, one for 1 year, and one for 6 months. All felt that a BHPC strength is hospitality. One participant felt that the blue dots were not the most effective way to reach newcomers, because they are too readily singled out and labeled by this strategy.

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to become within 10 years.**

The participants have a general sense that we need to identify our strengths and then build on these strengths. Increasing participation from those 500 people who aren't regular attendees would enable BHPC to better enable the vast number of projects and activities. And one member suggested that regularly scheduled projects, not just one or two a year, might draw in more people. The participants felt that exploring the performing arts and ways to involve families more directly (e.g., family retreats; family service) might be effective. The group also felt that the advice to "simplify" is important so that we can focus in on doing some specific projects in worship, education, and mission more effectively. It was suggested that we should look at ways to better enable some of the projects by redirecting staff support to those lay ministries that need more help than lay leadership can provide. And the group felt strongly that bolstering Sunday School is an important key to the future of BHPC. The group expressed the point that localizing some of our outreach and mission efforts would be useful in positioning BHPC in Bethesda, for instance, for the community of Bethesda is becoming increasingly urbanized with young people who are not presently in any church. The group also recognized, however, that BHPC serves the entire Washington region, so we should capitalize on our far-reaching community.

**Group 9**

**Joan Burns, facilitator Value: Open-mindedness**

**How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

Example given of Bible study groups in members' homes which met every other week – often the group had dinner together.

More big multi-generational large gatherings for social purposes.

Occasionally have only a single service rather than the two-service regime.

Progressive diners.

More local mission opportunities.

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

Friday emails from the pastor.

Workshops on specific subjects (e.g., current Peaceful Partners program).

Early morning devotions – to center you before you go to work, like the ones in Lent and Advent, but keep it throughout the year.

Publicize the mission opportunities that we offer; share the opportunities to serve more frequently.

Make a service/mission link on the website.

**One of our core values is OPEN-MINDEDNESS. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

The group felt we already do this: e.g., the BHPC- BJC relationship.

More exploration of Muslim faith.

Possibly develop another partnership/relationship with another congregation.

Need to go outside the walls of BHPC to be open-minded and intentional in the world.

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

Want BHPC to be “known” for something – love us or hate us, but you know what we stand for.

Use more banners and signs.

“Love one another”

Try to simplify – but how?

More joint mission with BJC – outside our walls.

More mission.

Need to nourish our spiritual lives so we can prioritize our commitments.

**Group 10 Bonnie Holcomb, Facilitator Value: Community**

Introductions by way of responses to the question “How have you experienced God’s presence in the past five years?” revealed that the people in this conversation had been members at BHPC for quite a long time. As we went around the table, members reported joining in 1989, 1993, 1991, 1988, 1991, 1991, 1972, 1973, 2000, and 1990. People reported feeling God’s presence

- in nature,
- working outdoors,
- in the sanctuary during worship,
- while making things,
- in conversations with others,
- in collective activity (especially intergenerational),
- in the columbarium,
- anywhere that prayer is possible,
- during meditation – alone and with others,
- in the midst of family,
- in relationships and activities which are blessed with common direction and common purpose.

**How can BHPC become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

**How could BHPC help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

We had a wide-ranging discussion which included how Bradley Hills could become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends and help us declare the living Christ on our everyday lives. Somebody proposed that mixing up the generations more frequently and in ways that allow for a natural collaboration between older and younger would help him. This will provide a context for experiencing community in a way that is different from the usual settings and would stretch everyone. Church would be the place where people get this kind of special experience of community. This got support from several who pointed out that such opportunities for meaningful experience do not occur in most people’s ordinary lives any more. It would take some work until people feel comfortable together. Another person said, however, that the community would be truly joyful for her if there were opportunities for non-traditional families to belong – for example, single parents, those faced with divorce, non-coupled professionals, retired, etc. She had belonged to a single Christian adults group that met every Sunday night for three years and it was wonderful. Another said that showing more sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs of individuals and their personal circumstances would be important for him. When he was in another church a major personal trauma occurred to him, no one at the church knew about it or reached out to him. One person remarked that the desire to have people in church contacting you is a function of your stage of life. Older persons might welcome this but others might not. Another said that we have to focus on nurturing the children. That would make BHPC an especially joyful place in a way it is not now. The suggestion that BHPC develop small conversation groups for sharing and growing together came up. This generated a comment from a woman whose husband is not part of the church and as a result she does not socialize at BHPC. That is fine with her, but

programs of that type would not draw her in. Her needs are more personal. Someone else said that we already have a lot going on that we need to do a better job about letting people know about – pastoral letters are very helpful in informing people as well as making people feel connected with the church family. This was acknowledged all around the table.

**One of our values is COMMUNITY. What could BHPC become if we lived that value? Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to become within 10 years.**

Putting our heads together about what BHPC could become if we lived the value of Community, generated a lot of comment. It was our assigned value, but had already come up many times. There was an extended exchange about how we define and see “community.” “Joyful community of spiritual friends” implies that we are referring to ourselves as a corporate group, which is fine for some purposes, but there are many ways that the value of ‘community’ should be framed to locate Bradley Hills in a very intentional way in other overlapping communities – in the local neighborhood, in the metropolitan Washington area, in our own presbytery community and in the world at large. (We could have spent the hour on this point alone, so we moved on to specific suggestions.) The concept of who our community is came up as we discussed those ideas.

There was a strong appeal from one member that Bradley Hills focus on becoming a dynamic growing church which she says is all about the children. We need to focus programs in the community that open up ourselves and our property to the community through concerted neighborhood outreach. This would need to be sustained and interactive so that the community would get to know us and feel comfortable in our boundaries. BHPC should become the neighborhood “Go To” center where activities are well-structured, safe and interesting. Another agreed that we should use our land (a valuable asset) for collective community outreach such a outdoor events on playground area. Another pointed out that the music programs are a great example of this kind of service to the community, drawing in visiting members from other areas. These are well-advertised. One member observed that the nursery school was set up to be exactly that kind of creative program in the neighborhood that would feed the church and many joined BHPC because of it. Someone offered that we might try to move toward a more active connection with the existing nursery. Another member supported the concept in principle but said that now the nursery school sees itself as totally independent from BHPC and almost rebuffs overtures of the kind we are considering. We would have to approach this as an education campaign starting with the Nursery School board if we want to go this direction. A suggestion that we put flyers into the nursery school backpacks, for example, would probably not be well-received by the nursery school. Another member said that the original suggestion should not be seen as addressing the BHPC Nursery School in particular, but in making a connection with young families and young parents around us. She referenced a creative Cedar Lane Unitarian Church program called Mom’s Mornings Out, which has been very successful in setting up lecture series and programs, treating the mothers as intellectual and social beings in addition to needing support in parenting. The notion that Bradley Hills should accept as a goal this kind of proactive community outreach received support from most at the table. There was a caution from one

older member who recalled that Bradley Hills used to be the “Go To” place in the neighborhood until the building was overrun with so many activities that BHPC could not schedule its own. She did not recommend a return to those days. She suggested that we are an aging congregation and that rather than turning from our aging loyal members to look exclusively to outreach for younger prospects, we should establish programs suitable and nurturing to our elderly population inside and outside the building.

Two other concrete suggestions were proposed. One member brought to the conversation the proposal that we develop the Columbarium as a mission among our own members. Members should be challenged to consider reserving spaces for themselves and their families there. The very fact of having your family members inured (not sure if this is the proper term, but this is what it sounded like) in the church makes it a sacred space for you and gives you place for meditation and connection. She said that everything that goes on in this building is made sacred by the presence of her loved one. Others responded appreciatively.

Two of the participants in this group (Bonnie Holcomb and Elizabeth Padgett) had been part of a discussion group at the Session Retreat where a joint proposal was already made that Bradley Hills Holy Audacious Goal be to transform into a Center for Reconciliation for the BHPC community and in several wider communities – such as those mentioned in the above discussion, the neighborhood, the region and the world. This proposal was explained to this group and was received positively. The intentional connection between the spiritual support and nourishment of persons who do the work of reconciliation in their own families and in service to their immediate communities received some comment. One person at the table works for a charitable organization and said that whether carrying out service activities as a professional or as a volunteer, you are subject to burnout and need support and the energy of others. Conducting advocacy (lobbying for a cause) is exhausting as is the challenge of working in a cross-cultural context or within the global community. Several BHPC members travel and confront daunting challenges in the world that put a strain on their Christian values.

Hearing this proposal one participant said that nurturing and nourishing members for their work “outside” could bring into focus the other BHPC core values as we structured services and programs, but it would take some education. Another said that such education would not be limited to BHPC members. One member noted that this idea is consistent with the kind of education for mothers that had been discussed earlier. Another said that it is consistent with the smaller groups approach, too, if BHPC initiated smaller, more manageable groups with common outreach interests. The person who had suggested intergenerational activities offered that trips could be set up in which not just youth participate but older and younger together. Reconciliation would result not only from what they learn intellectually but from their experience with one another and those at the destination point. If these were made open to community participation, they would serve community goals as well. It would be a matter of alignment. This idea was accepted and some shared how trips had affected them.

The challenge of raising awareness and coordinating programs around one goal if we turn in a new direction was remarked on by two who said that they support the idea but realize that the work of maintaining the information flow would be a challenge. Someone remarked that we

experience community in worship as well and that the two should not be seen as separate – the two experiences could be brought into focus so that they enrich one another. Worship helps to define and redefine what it means to be a Christian in the world. She said that we need to stop being afraid of being spiritual beings and embrace our role as active Christians without apology. In trying to connect the core values, someone said that we have to experience joy together constantly in order to have something to share and be ready to share it.

**Group 11                      Charlie Evans, facilitator   Value: Beauty**

**How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you? How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

BHPC needs to draw in more young families moving into the community. Perhaps we need a Saturday or other day than Sunday worship service for these families. More emphasis on chancel players, videos, more contemporary music like this morning in worship for these families.

BHPC should be a place to get away from the stress of daily life; BHPC needs to be a spiritual refuge. We need to work on getting our members to experience the spiritual refuge of our building and the atmosphere/activities within so they can proclaim it to the community.

What are the distinctive features of BHPC:

Our pastors: we need to advertise their talents and accomplishments more

Music

Sharing our building with BJC - should we have occasional services with other non-Christian and Christian congregations?

**One of our core values is BEAUTY. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

We use art, music, dance, drama, using and sharing our building to discover God and provide a spiritual refuge. We need more members and resources to promote BHPC's beauty whether pragmatic or ethereal to the community.

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

A spiritual refuge to attract and serve local and distant people. A non-guilty place where you come to rejuvenate and grow and do not have to join in more activities. A place where people come and leave feeling better. A place that provides comfort and peace. A place with a good balance of serving our church community and others in the local and larger world.

**Group 12**

**Mary Hickey, facilitator Value: JOY**

**How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

Gather as small groups to learn more about each other .

We sit with our friends at weekend events.

Create more random groups.

The Koionia Clusters groups didn't work (this was an effort to divide the congregation into smaller groups in the 1990's).

Mix people up at group events – assign numbers. The group responded positively above to being mixed up for this activity, although our small numbers indicated that several people probably had defected before they walked all the way to table 12.

Can we use the Deacon groups as a basis for mixing up groups?

Have to be sensitive that some folks believe church is a place to worship and not to socialize.

Need to be careful about asking folks why they haven't been at church lately. Some might be feeling guilty and not think some humorous quips are funny!

Do you know your deacon? We need to be in touch with all the folks in the church.

Should the deacons be organized geographically? Can they be more effective?

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

Does the church recognize that we are Christians in the community?

Does the church support us with this?

The church offers space and provides people.

Worship helps me go out and help others.

Should we be looking at what we need to do better?

I need to prod myself to do more outside the church.

Worship helps me in my own life.

The discussion turned to education and the difference Matt Rupcich made by providing a musical program for the children both in Sunday School and fellowship. Would like someone dedicated to such a program.

Lack of musical involvement in the church – are we failing the children of the church?

What are we doing to get the parents to get the kids to church?

The culture has changed: stores are open on Sunday, more activities.

The use of Godly Play (Worship for Children) for children is viewed positively.

How can we get new blood in the children's ministry?

We need someone in music dedicated to children.

Read the Bible, play music – youth need more activity in Sunday School – too much like school.

More music for children.

**One of our core values is JOY. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

We think we are very joyful – BHPC lives the value Joy.

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

More members become more active.

Having a large non-active membership is not good.

Sharing of tasks: this was a response to the fact that so few people volunteer for so many jobs. Some people only come to worship when they have a task, so we should spread the tasks around.

We're no longer a 9-5 world.

Can we learn from 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian?

Do we use our staff effectively? The staff can do some things better than anyone else: e.g., preach, teach Bible study and lead worship. We can do more of the logistical stuff and let them do more of what they do best.

Can we run meetings ourselves? This would allow more effective use of staff.

Are we too political? Too far to the left? Some people think only Democrats are welcome and Susan celebrates our liberal religious values and mixes them with politics, which led to the next stated question.

Can you lead if you are not true to yourself?

Why do we have to bring politics into church? Church is church! Picture Edith emphasizing this. For some of us politics and politicians are a little untrustworthy and not appropriate for sermons.

Perhaps we don't want to go to church and hear the headlines – but as Christians aren't we supposed to be the voice on issues?

Are we pushing our youth away because we can't have open conversations without being judgmental?

Do our former youth feel comfortable returning to the church as adults? Many feel like kids when they come back and are not valued as they are in their new church homes. This may be an untapped resource of new(old) members who will be forming families in the next ten years and could revitalize us.

Can we set a goal other than helping ourselves and creating a strong community in the church?

Can we accept change?

Do the deacons still write notes to members? Can we integrate asking if they need help?

**Group 13**

**Todd McCreight , Facilitator Value: Open-mindedness**

A few ideas: we don't need more big programs, but perhaps more support groups/efforts for issues such as aging parents, raising teenagers, parenting in general, dealing with stress and sleep deprivation. These could be held at 9:30 am, which could get more kids to Church School.

One "joyful" idea would be to spread our volunteer work into our backyard community: BHPC and BJC could do a joint clean-up and removal of invasive plants at the Hillmead Park, which is a few blocks down Bradley Blvd toward Bethesda. We could leaflet the nearby neighborhoods before hand, asking for more volunteers, and perhaps that way attract both non-affiliated Jewish residents and "wannabe" Christians to our respective congregations.

As for our core value (open-mindedness), it was suggested that we shouldn't go too far in this BHPC virtue. We would water down our beliefs and faith. Also, it was asked: do we have "blind spots" in our self-righteousness? We need to advertise more effectively and become more public?

As for a 10-year goal for BHPC: A more prominent and all-engaging international mission? It was observed that we seem to have more activists in the international arena and that is where real passion lies. We are already involved in the Middle East and Africa, and Asia has been proposed by others. With so much expertise here in Washington on international issues, we have a convenient resource base. Proclaiming this mission might help us partner more deeply with BJC, which has some of this global chemistry, too. It might also help us attract more members from the DC area international community.

**Group 14                      Carol Starr, facilitator    Value: Honesty**

**How have you experienced God's presence through Bradley Hills?**

A discussion at a Session meeting that could have been particularly contentious – felt the Holy Spirit was with the Session and helped the conversation.

8.30 am worship: Lou Kallas's reading of the names of those who died in Iraq conflict;

Habitat for Humanity and joint project with other congregation

Session membership; as 30 year member at BHPC I feel a strong sense of community and nourishment.

Strong connections made at the Women's Retreat

Women's Retreat and friendships

Experience as a teacher working with youth. Felt it in committee work on property management: hard decision was made quickly in spirit of working together.

**How can Bradley Hills become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

**How could Bradley Hills help you better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

More time should be spent tuning into others and centering oneself – become less busy.

Slow down – take on fewer tasks.

Individuals could look up and greet one another, take time to thank one another for what they do.

Church needs to show more interest in reaching out to newcomers.

I also felt unwelcome as a newcomer and still feel this at times.

Often are approached abruptly about volunteering versus taking time to get to know others and find out about their interests and needs at the time.

First impressions are important.

When we joined in 1993, the process included 3 classes, which allowed time to tell our story and bond with the group. Allowed us more chance to connect and to become involved.

How do we overcome Washingtonian superficial behavior when people come to BHPC?

Sponsors for new members need an ongoing role (Deacons)

Need more than one sponsor – perhaps deacon could have stronger role with new members.

Expectations need to change

Hospitality and community -- open awareness of connection with each other -- are primary; the other values can flow from these.

There are too many duties and responsibilities for many of us when we step into the church which form a barrier to the connectedness that we want to achieve.

For new members we need to have specific follow-up after they join to connect them with other people. Start with the person's deacon, who should get acquainted with them, then in turn connect them with other members.

Can we notice who is not attending – both children and adults – and then connect with them one on one and ask why they're not here?

Suggestion for Adult Ministries: Conversation groups with topic of the week or month; parenting teenagers, dealing with stress, facing loved ones with Alzheimer's disease or memory loss.

**One of our core values is Honesty. What could BHPC become if we lived that value? Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

(Many of the suggestions from the previous question would also be incorporated into the vision of what people wanted the church to be like in the next 10 years).

Being more connected – more present for each other

Taking more time for open conversation through small group discussion. Taking the opportunity for people to get to know one other, their interests and backgrounds, whenever we work together.

Taking time to find out what people's interests are so that we can better match peoples' interests with the work that they do for the church.

**Group 15                      Susie Wellman, Facilitator    Value: Quality**

**How can BHPC become more of a joyful community of spiritual friends for you?**

Is there a youth group participating in the visioning program?

Build a better connection to the children of the church – use the model that the BHPC nursery school uses (learning through play)

Make it a place where children connect with their friends (so fun and exciting they will want to bring their friends to church school)

In turn, parents(adults) will want to come and see what their children are experiencing and see what adult opportunities there are

Create opportunity to use groups to bring families together for activities at BHPC

**How could BHPC help you to better proclaim the living Christ in your everyday life?**

This is hard for BHPC, we need discussion groups to provide support for this

Create opportunity to model good behavior (conflict resolution training, gently leading by example, without preaching)

Create a way to understand what is available at the church using multimedia on the web

**One of our values is Quality. What could BHPC become if we lived that value?**

Some in the group were very turned off by this word and we came up with a comfortable synonyms/substitutes – meaningful, valuable

Meaningful connections in small groups

Better marketing of what is going on at BHPC on our web site

Higher expectations for our children achieved through youth coordinator/director

Paid full-time web manager to create more buzz about BHPC, engage web visitors

**Thinking now about all of BHPC's core values and our purpose, describe what you hope BHPC will be able to achieve within 10 years.**

Fully-engaged youth

Kids bringing kids, parents will follow

Vibrant multi-generational community