

VISIONING TASK FORCE REPORTS TO THE SESSION

The Visioning Task Force has issued its report to the Session. After presentations from the task force at its September and October meetings, the Session heard presentations from task force members. The Session agreed to adopt the task force report as a working document to guide its actions as Bradley Hills goes forward in this interim period.

From our dialogue with the congregation and its leadership, the Task Force sensed that there is nearly complete satisfaction with our core mission and values statements. In our report, we have tried to provide a framework to the Session which can help all of us engaged in the ministry of this congregation answer the question: How can we shine together as a brighter beacon inviting others to be disciples of Jesus Christ? Several clear themes emerge from our dialogue with the congregation that affirm the strengths, embody the hopes, and reflect the concerns over the future of Bradley Hills.

Bradley Hills's Strong Worship Tradition is Valued

We consistently heard that members value the worship experience at Bradley Hills. Strong and challenging preaching and a long tradition of fine church music, are hallmarks of our Sunday worship. Meaningful worship experiences extend outside of Sunday mornings through Daybreak Devotions; seasonal preparation and celebrations at Advent and Lent; memorial services, weddings, and retreats. There are growing edges in worship, such as the integration of drama and speech choir into worship through the Chancel Players and the intimacy of the 8:30 am worship service. While many appreciate the traditional order of the 11 am service, many are open to building on our worship tradition by drawing in different forms of music and expression, such as world music, praise songs, and faith sharing.

Our Members Have a Strong Commitment to Service to Others

Living out the Gospel through service to others is also a long tradition at Bradley Hills and is reflected in our values of community and compassion. Our members are deeply committed to community involvement and mission. In addition to involvement in organizations serving the local community, a commitment to global mission has garnered the support of many members. Youth mission opportunities are cited as the strength of the youth program. Giving to mission causes is consistently strong. Nonetheless, some members perceive that we may be too willing to undertake additional projects and programs, while others say they find it difficult to plug into some church activities or are unaware of opportunities to participate in some projects.

Intellectual Engagement and Openness to Other Viewpoints is Important

Engagement with matters of faith and public policy, exploration of theological issues, and interfaith dialogue also are characteristic of the congregation. Many value hearing a contemporary connection to the Gospel message from the pulpit, even when they disagree with the pastor's viewpoint. Others appreciate the opportunities to explore faith or current issues through adult education and other forums. Recent task forces on welcoming and accessibility demonstrate a concern for those often marginalized in our society. Many noted our covenant relationship with Bethesda Jewish Congregation as a model on which to build other bridges of

interfaith cooperation and understanding. In these ways, we heard affirmation of our values of hospitality, honesty, integrity, and open-mindedness.

Fostering Spiritual Growth is a Leading Edge

We sensed an underlying spiritual hunger -- a desire that the heart, not only the head, be nourished. We heard this from those who want more opportunities for joyful expression during worship and those who suggest more opportunities to share stories of our faith journeys with one another. A lack of spiritual intimacy may be one reason why a few told us that they found little to be passionate about at Bradley Hills. Folks want their spiritual batteries recharged – and they see the pastors having a primary role in that recharging, a role that many think is diminished by the administrative and other demands of our extended programs. The church is a place that should be (and to many already is) an oasis for refreshment of the spirit.

We Desire Greater Connectedness within the Congregation

Related to the hunger for spiritual growth was a longing for greater connection among members of the congregation. We heard divergent views as to whether we are a friendly, welcoming congregation. While many members have long-standing friendships in the congregation, others say that, though they are impressed with our programs, they do not have close relationships with others in the church. The integration of new members into the congregation is uneven, from making connections with others to inviting them to share their gifts and talents in our ministries. The dialogue consistently touched on the value of participation in small groups as a way to build relationships among members and overcome the anonymity of a large membership.

We are Concerned about Our Ability to Attract and Engage Young Families

In our conversations, it became clear that Bradley Hills is perceived as a “graying congregation” and, while that trend may not differ markedly from other mainline churches, we desire to bring younger families into our community. Concern for children and youth also permeated all of our conversations. Although some things we do seem to be engaging – Worship for Children and youth mission trips frequently were cited – there is anxiety over declining church school attendance and whether we are meeting the needs of young families. Like it or not, many families perceive church attendance on Sundays as merely an option, not a “must,” whether the competition is children’s sports or the need for a few hours of family quiet time in a frenetic culture. Finding a new paradigm to engage young families is one of our greatest challenges.

Our Lay and Professional Leadership is Stretched to the Limit

The leadership of the congregation and the professional staff often feel overtaxed and burned out. The professional staff is swamped with demands to support meetings and carry out administrative duties that take valuable time from their pastoral and professional roles. The Session’s role as spiritual leaders of the congregation is diminished by its substantial participation in church administration. Filling leadership positions has become difficult. There is a sense that resource decisions are made and new programs or initiatives adopted to “grease a squeaky wheel” rather than through conscious consideration of their impact on existing ministries or their relation to our mission and values. We heard the Session’s desire for greater engagement in spiritual leadership as well as recognition that we need to shed some things if we are to refresh ourselves and achieve greater connectedness as a congregation.

As the Session, Deacons and lay ministries begin to engage with our findings and report, we hope you will join them in capturing new vision and energy for what God is doing at Bradley Hills. It has been an honor to serve with my fellow task force members over the past year, all of them passionate disciples of Jesus Christ who care deeply for the future of this congregation: Doug Adamson, Jan Hauck, Ed Hummers, Bob Reutershan, Yoshi Sei, Becky Wagner, Myla Williams, and Andrew Wolvin.

-- *Steve Burns, VTF Chair*