

Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church

**REPORT of the
VISIONING TASK FORCE**

September 2006

**Steve Burns, Chair
Doug Adamson
Jan Hauck
Ed Hummers
Bob Reutershan
Yoshi Sei
Becky Wagner
Myla Williams
Andrew Wolvin**

Report of the Visioning Task Force

September 2006

Background and Methodology

Establishment of the Visioning Task Force

The Visioning Task Force (VTF) was established by the Session in September 2005, based on the following recommendation of the Strategic Resource Audit Task Force:

To create a new task force, to be called the Visioning Task Force, for the purpose of discerning God's vision for our life and ministry as a congregation for the next five years. The task force is to design and implement a congregation-based process to visualize whom God is calling us to be as a unique congregation in Christ and to understand who we are and who we want to become. The process is to result in coordinated review and revision, as appropriate, of the BHPC mission, vision and value statements....

The VTF initiated its work in October 2005. The members of the task force appointed by the Session are: Steve Burns, Jan Hauck, Doug Adamson, Ed Hummers, Bob Reutershan, Yoshi Sei, Becky Wagner, Myla Williams, Andrew Wolvin, and the Rev. Susan Andrews (staff liaison). Steve Burns agreed to serve as Chair and Jan Hauck as Recorder.

As a working statement of its purpose, the VTF adopted early in its work the following goals for its efforts: (1) to test our mission, values, and vision statements against experience and our sense of where our congregation and its leadership are being called; (2) to identify goals that emerge from our deliberations and conversations with the congregation and its leadership and develop an implementation action plan for the lay ministries to follow over the next five-year period; and (3) to assess whether BHPC's structure, programs, staffing patterns, and resources present barriers or opportunities to realizing our vision, values, and possible goals.

Preparation for Our Work

We considered conceptual models for strategic planning, particularly Gil Rendle and Alice Mann's *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* (2003) and Jim Collins's *Good to Great and the Social Sectors: Why Business Thinking Is Not the Answer* (2005) [see <http://www.jimcollins.com/lib/articles/socialsectors.html>]. At one meeting, we used the services of a consultant, the Rev. Ann Philbrick of Heartwood LLC, www.heartwoodcct.com. She helped us to design a framework for our deliberation and to develop a plan for consulting with the congregation. Two of our members also participated in workshops on Congregational Transformation presented by the National Capital Presbytery as part of the Presbytery's efforts to assist churches in their long-term planning and renewal initiatives.

The VTF also reviewed reports of prior strategic planning committees at Bradley Hills. Ours is the fourth such review at Bradley Hills following the one conducted in 1990 early in Rev. Susan Andrews's pastorate, and others that were conducted in 1996 and 2000. Of particular

importance to our review was the report of Task Force MMX¹, as adopted by the Session in July 2000, because Bradley Hills's current mission, vision, and values statements derive from the fine work of that Task Force.

In addition, a wealth of reports and material developed by earlier task forces and lay ministries at Bradley Hills gave us a broad picture of the issues and challenges we face, as well as the progress achieved by the congregation over the past few years. We particularly relied upon

- The report of the Strategic Resource Audit Task Force of 2005, which focused on Bradley Hills's physical, human, organizational, and financial resource challenges;
- The report of the Accessibility Task Force of 2005, which reviewed ways to make Bradley Hills more accessible to persons with disabilities;
- The report of the Welcoming Task Force of 2005, which described how we could be more welcoming to gays and lesbians as fully participating members of the Bradley Hills church family;
- The updated history of Bradley Hills, *Called by God for 50 Years*, which was prepared as part of the 50th anniversary celebration in 2005;
- The 2003 report of the Education & Nurture Task Force on Church School, which focused on the decline in church school attendance at Bradley Hills;
- The Strategic Evangelism Plan of 1998, which was developed to provide a long-range plan for attracting new members.

Finally, we reviewed a number of sources that set forth statistical data and the results of surveys of our congregation and the surrounding community. We studied membership and financial giving at Bradley Hills, the Percept Group's statistical review from U.S. census data on demographics in the 3 mile radius surrounding Bradley Hills, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey report on congregational attitudes reflected in the survey taken during worship at Bradley Hills in January 2005, and a review of families' preferences for the church school program undertaken in spring 2006.

Consultation with the Congregation and Its Leadership

Early on, the VTF recognized that dialogue – indeed, “holy conversation” – with members of our faith community, its leadership, and the staff of Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church was critical to our undertaking. We engaged in these “holy conversations” in a number of ways. We held a joint meeting with the Session and Deacons early in our review in November 2005; distributed and reviewed response-card surveys inserted in the Sunday bulletin over three weeks in January 2006; held an open forum following the annual meeting on January 29, 2006, which about 25 members attended; participated in the Session's retreat in February 2006; sponsored a congregation-wide Holy Conversation as an extension of worship on March 12, 2006, in which 125 participated; met for dialogue with the Bradley Hills staff in late March 2006; conducted an open forum in which several members, long-term and newer, shared perspectives with the VTF in April 2006; and conducted a survey of youth and families at their end of program-year dinner in May 2006. In May and June 2006, the

¹ “MMX” refers to the Roman numerals representing 2010, reflecting the Task Force's focus on a vision to lead Bradley Hills through the first decade of the 21st century.

Deacons attempted to contact members who had not been at worship recently or had not been otherwise active in the congregation. Although about 10 responses were obtained, the Deacons were unable to contact many of these members. Thoughts added by e-mails, hallway conversations, and postings on the VTF's web mailbox also enriched our work. Synopses of these various interactions are included as appendices to this report.

Thinking about the Future

Early in our work as a task force, Susan Andrews led us through a study of scripture from Isaiah 56, Matthew 9, II Corinthians 1, and Revelation 21 to help put in front of us Biblical principles to guide our visioning. As we move forward, it is worth recalling those principles:

- Have optimistic trust that God is with us in this process, even when we seem confused;
- God's vision is always to expand the circle of love in ever more inclusive ways;
- Our vision is not just about us – but about God's wider world and people whom we may not think belong;
- We are called to move out of the past, because God is bigger than the past;
- Some basics of the faith – covenant, justice, God, Christ as central – never change, even as the ways we express those basics need to change;
- We have to give up some old things in order to receive and become something new;
- We can move into the new while also honoring and preserving much of the past;
- God is doing the visioning and the growing of the new, while we are the ones who plant and water the seeds;
- We are partners with God though this whole process, God working with us and never abandoning us.

From our reading, the advice from our consultant Rev. Ann Philbrick,² and our work together, we saw the challenge to be the development of a vision that would transform Bradley Hills from a "*Place where...*" to a "*People who...*" We are invited to transform this church from a traditional vendor of religious services to a missional people gathered around a set of values and practices. By "missional," we mean *being* the Body of Christ and understanding that *everything* we do is a witness to the world.

The task before us is the continuing process of aligning the congregation with the vision and mission that God is calling the church to be and do -- the Great Commandment and the Great Commission. Our vision for Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church is that we move evermore completely, with clarity and passion, toward the mission Jesus gave the Church:

MAKING DISCIPLES!

² Much of this discussion of congregational transformation and the missional church is adapted from Rev. Philbrick's presentation to the task force. On the missional church *see also* <http://www.missionalchurch.org>.

Our task is about...



- discovering (or re-discovering) our congregation's core purpose;
- pressing for deeper indicators of success than size or numbers.

It assumes we know our values and purpose...

and even once we do, we are called to:

- continual reflection and evaluation based on our values and purpose;
- growing flexibility on practices and strategies.³

Our task is not about ... making members, or making decisions, or merely keeping members happy.

As we found from our dialogue with the Session at its February retreat, our charge is to be –

VISIONARY, MISSIONAL, CONNECTIONAL!

What Did We Hear?

From our review of earlier reports and recent data and from dialogue with the congregation and its lay and professional leadership, a number of clear themes emerged that affirm the strengths, embody the hopes, and reflect the concerns over the future of Bradley Hills. Our conversations have touched on youth, church school attendance, hunger for greater spirituality, the membership numbers on our books, “pledging units” vs. attendance, aging populations, our programming levels, and small groups.

Bradley Hills's Strong Worship Tradition is Valued

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

³ The figure “Preserve and Change” comes from Jim Collins.

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. The U.S. Congregational Life Survey showed that our members' commitment to community involvement and mission is in the very top percentile of congregations surveyed.⁴ The congregation has had a role in founding service agencies such as Community Ministries of Montgomery County, Bethesda HELP, and Bethesda Cares, and members continue to volunteer with these and many other local organizations. More recently, a strong commitment to global mission, particularly in Africa and the Middle East, has garnered the commitment of many members. Youth mission opportunities are cited as the one great strength of the youth program. Giving to mission causes, whether through the Angel Gift Tree, special offerings, the AIDS benefit concerts, or responses to special needs like tsunami or hurricane relief, consistently is strong. Nonetheless, some members perceive that we may be too willing to undertake additional projects and programs and may be stretched too broadly, 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

Intellectual 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 issues or current issues through adult education and other forums. Recent task force efforts on welcoming and accessibility demonstrate a concern for those often marginalized in our society. Perhaps most importantly, many noted our covenant relationship with Bethesda Jewish Congregation as an important model for us and others and a valued relationship on which to build other bridges of interfaith cooperation and understanding. In these various ways, we heard affirmation of our values of hospitality, honesty, integrity, and open-mindedness.

Fostering Spiritual Growth is a Leading Edge

While a strong intellectual tradition permeates through Bradley Hills, we sensed an underlying spiritual hunger -- a desire that the heart, not only the head, be nourished. We heard this in a number of ways, from those who want more opportunities for joyful expression during worship to those who suggest greater 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 seen as a place that should be (and to many already is) an oasis for refreshment of the spirit that sends us back out on our journey. Nurturing the soul equips our members for their lives in the home, school, the workplace, the community, and the world.

⁴ This Survey compares our congregation's responses with the aggregate results of all survey participants.

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 with others in the congregation, others say that, though they are impressed with Bradley Hills's ministries, they do not have close relationships with others in the church. The integration of new members into the life of the congregation is uneven, from making connections with others to inviting them to share their gifts and talents in our ministries.⁵ The dialogue in our "Holy Conversations" 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 also heard that communications of opportunities for involvement and service could be improved.

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 be markedly different or even as pronounced as in other mainline churches, there is a uniform desire to bring younger families into our community. From a purely pragmatic standpoint, our community of faith has no future if we are unable to refresh it with new generations of disciples. 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

While deeply committed to Bradley Hills and to living out the Christian life, the leadership of the congregation and the professional staff often feel overtaxed and burned out. We heard many times that lay and staff leadership are stretched too thin:

- Bradley Hills is trying to sustain programming levels for a church twice its size;
- Members of the professional staff are swamped with demands to support meetings and carry out administrative duties that take valuable time that could be spent on their pastoral and professional roles;
- Negotiating administrative procedures at Bradley Hills is a daunting task;
- The Session's role as spiritual leaders of the congregation is diminished by its substantial participation in church administration;
- Filling leadership positions on Session and Deacons, as well as on lay ministries, 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.

⁵ As noted earlier, the Deacons attempted to contact disengaged members to determine why they were not attending worship or active in the congregation. Although the responses were limited in number, the lack of a feeling of connection to the life of the congregation was an underlying theme.

The rallying cry at the Session retreat was “Simplify!” In that charge, we heard the members of the Session’s desire for greater engagement in spiritual leadership as well as a recognition that we need to shed some things if we are to refresh ourselves and achieve greater connectedness as a congregation. There is also a sense of a need for greater empowerment of lay ministries and other groups to make decisions and undertake their work without over-dependency or involvement by the Session and the staff.

A Lens for the Future

One of the primary tasks of the Visioning Task Force was to review and suggest possible revisions to the Bradley Hills mission, vision, and value statements that were adopted in 2000 as the result of Task force MMX. Our sense from our dialogue with the congregation and its leadership is that there is nearly complete satisfaction with our core mission and values statements (with perhaps some fine-tuning).⁶ However, we asked, what would stimulate progress in living out our mission and values and would be a lens through which we effectively can view and channel our resources and energy? In our discussions, we often turned to the image of lit candles that Deacon Yoshi Sei helped us see. If today we have only some 200 or 300 lit candles representing the active members of Bradley Hills, how do we light the candles of the other 400 or so members of Bradley Hills to encourage them to become more engaged in our congregation? How can we shine together as a brighter beacon inviting others to be disciples of Jesus Christ?

In what follows, we present an affirmation of our core purpose and values and then attempt to sharpen the focus on them in a way that we hope will help the Session, our other leadership, and our congregation sharpen their focus and rediscover that purpose and those values. What we have not done is prescribe specific program initiatives or cuts, or administrative improvements, or resource allocations, or staffing changes. That simply was not our task – and for good reason. If we had done so, we would have lost focus on the broader vision we were tasked to address. We would have usurped the proper role of the Session, the Deacons, the lay ministries, and the congregation in grappling with the sometimes tough issues and decisions about how we live our life together. Instead, we hope we have provided a lens through which our leadership and lay ministries can look at what they are doing now and what they should be doing to grow better disciples at Bradley Hills. This lens, we hope, will provide them courage to change, courage to shed, and courage to dream anew.

So what, then, are the next steps? We hope, of course, that early in the fall of 2006 the Session will adopt our report and our recommended statement of the Vision for the Future of Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church that follows on the next few pages. Once adopted, the Visioning Task Force stands ready to work with the Session, Deacons, and the lay ministries in applying the Vision to our current programs, organization, resources, and staffing.

To carry our work forward, the VTF recommends meetings with the lay leadership to develop a deeper understanding of the report and the “roadmap” to taking action on it. The roadmap will lead us to challenge existing assumptions and paradigms and to explore all options for

⁶ While the mission statement resonated with the congregation and many lifted up the values during our conversation, we did not find similar recollection of the vision statements.

change. It asks us to make choices that are consistent with the framework of our Vision for the Future and to identify specific steps and timelines for further action.

To do this, we foresee engaging the leadership of the congregation to move to action within six months of the Session's adoption of the Vision for the Future. With a relatively simple framework for evaluation, the congregation's leadership – the Session, the Deacons, and the Lay Ministries -- can stimulate progress and consider change broadly, using our Vision as a lens for what is possible and appropriate for Bradley Hills. These next steps will involve small teams focused on –

- Reviewing our Vision for the Future;
- Brainstorming actions⁷ to support each strategy;
- Prioritizing the opportunities for action; and
- Defining action steps and accountability for them

Ultimately, to be successful in this effort, we must be prepared to

- Establish a real sense of urgency for change;
- Build a powerful coalition within the congregation to guide our change efforts;
- Communicate the Vision passionately and frequently;
- Create plans to put the strategy into action;
- Empower broad-based action within the congregation;
- Celebrate our successes; and
- Keep changing to stimulate more progress.⁸

Over its 50 years, Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church has risen to such challenges. With God's help we can do so again.

⁷ Actions also include opportunities to shed or simplify what we've been doing.

⁸ Adapted from John Kotter, *Leading Change*.

Our Vision for the Future

Our Enduring Purpose

*To Proclaim the Living Christ in Our Everyday Lives –
Nurturing the Soul and Serving the World*

This statement is at the core of our vision and affirms the central purpose at the heart of the 2000 and 1991 mission statements – proclaiming the Living Christ in our everyday lives. For Bradley Hills, that translates to providing spiritual nourishment to equip us to engage the world.

Our Commitment

To be a joyful community of disciples in which every member is committed to experiencing God through worship, learning, and service.

To live out our purpose, we emphasize our commitment to binding ourselves together in community. Jesus calls us to greater discipleship individually and in community. As in the 2000 mission statement, worship, learning, and service are at the heart of our vision of deepening discipleship as a faith community.

Our Core Values

Hospitality—*we welcome others and embrace our differences*
Community—*we seek to be a loving and caring Christian family*
Compassion—*we respond to the pain and need of others*
Joy—*we celebrate the abundance of God's grace in our lives*
Beauty—*we discover God with our eyes, our ears, and our hearts*
Honesty—*we seek and share the truth*
Integrity—*we strive to live in accordance with Christ's teachings*
Open-mindedness—*we explore a diversity of ideas on our journey of faith*
Stewardship—*we share our time, talents, and financial resources*

We found throughout our conversations strong identification with the core values adopted in 2000, with one exception. For many, the core values express who we want to be as a congregation and how we live out our life as a faith community. Members readily aligned these values to the best Bradley Hills has to offer in worship, in mission, and education. The one exception was the value “Quality” adopted in 2000. Whatever worthiness as a value was intended, it is interpreted by many as being too elitist and a hindrance in building greater community. We did add Stewardship as a value. We heard that greater stewardship of our resources individually and collectively is important, not only from the standpoint of keeping from spreading ourselves too thin, but also from the call to deeper commitment to share our time, talent, and financial resources with others.

Our Commission

- ❖ *Grow the church by fostering relationships and building community.*
- ❖ *Be disciples by pouring our lives into others throughout our community and the world.*
- ❖ *Make our church a space for spiritual refreshment, reconciliation, and interfaith dialogue and engagement.*
- ❖ *Celebrate in worship through preaching, music, drama, poetry, and visual arts.*
- ❖ *Seek to understand the theological, ethical, and social issues we face in the world today.*
- ❖ *Learn through listening, studying the Word, and sharing in intergenerational small groups.*
- ❖ *Be a church where everyone has a deep sense of commitment and belonging.*

As we live out the vision embodied in our enduring purpose, commitment, and values, we begin to focus on the things that will help us achieve them and to address the key conclusions drawn from our “Holy Conversation” with the congregation. At our best as a congregation, we experience inspiring worship, engage in open dialogue on theological and contemporary issues, partner across religious lines, and pour ourselves into helping others. However, we also aspire to a deeper connection with God, seek stronger commitment from our entire community, and long for a greater sense of belonging with each other. In our Commission, we see the essential description of our faith community against which our programs and resource commitments should be measured.

Our Strategy

Worship—*Offer a variety of diverse worship experiences to inspire each member to worship regularly and to build a broader community.*

Learning—*Build a strong Christian education program focused on the spiritual growth of every member.*

Service—*Create an environment in which service and the pursuit of social justice are central to the stewardship message and life of the congregation.*

To achieve our vision, the Session, the Deacons, and the lay ministries should evaluate and orient our organization, our programs, our staffing, and financial resources around these basic strategies to reinvigorate and focus our ministries in the key areas of Worship, Learning, and Service.

Our Goals

Worship—*Every member participates in some form of worship experience at Bradley Hills each week.*

Learning—*Every member is involved in an on-going small group learning environment focused on spiritual development and fellowship.*

Service—*Every member serves through one of BHPC's mission outreach opportunities and commits to stewardship of time, talent, and money.*

Our Goals are intended to help us answer these two questions: How do we know whether we are being effective in implementing our strategy and achieving our vision? How do we know whether we are focusing our programs and resources on the right things? Our leadership and lay ministries continually should be asking whether their activities, structure, and initiatives are helping or hindering the achievement of those goals.

Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church
OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Our Enduring Purpose
*To Proclaim the Living Christ in Our Everyday Lives:
Nurturing the Soul and Serving the World*

Our Commitment
To be a joyful community of disciples in which
every member is committed to experiencing God through worship, learning, and service.

Our Core Values
Hospitality—we welcome others and embrace our differences.
Community—we seek to be a loving and caring Christian family.
Compassion—we respond to the pain and need of others.
Joy—we celebrate the abundance of God’s grace in our lives.
Beauty—we discover God with our eyes, our ears, and our hearts.
Honesty—we seek and share the truth.
Integrity—we strive to live in accordance with Christ’s teachings.
Open-mindedness—we explore a diversity of ideas on our journey of faith.
Stewardship—we share our time, talents, and financial resources.

- Our Commission**
- ❖ Grow the church by fostering relationships and building community.
 - ❖ Be disciples by pouring our lives into others throughout our community and the world.
 - ❖ Make our church a space for spiritual refreshment, reconciliation, and interfaith dialogue and engagement.
 - ❖ Celebrate in worship through preaching, music, drama, poetry, and visual arts.
 - ❖ Seek to understand the theological, ethical, and social issues we face in the world today.
 - ❖ Learn through listening, studying the Word, and sharing in intergenerational small groups.
 - ❖ Be a church where everyone has a deep sense of commitment and belonging.

Our Strategy
Worship—Offer a variety of diverse worship experiences to inspire each member to worship regularly and to build a broader community.
Learning—Build a strong Christian education program focused on the spiritual growth of every member.
Service—Create an environment in which service and the pursuit of social justice are central to the stewardship message and life of the congregation.

Our Goals
Worship—Every member participates in some form of worship experience at Bradley Hills each week.
Learning—Every member is involved in an on-going small group learning environment focused on spiritual development and fellowship.
Service—Every member serves through one of BHPC’s mission outreach opportunities and commits to stewardship of time, talent, and money.