

SPC Mission Study

Delivered: December, 2022

The intent of the Mission Study Report is to reflect on the current state of Sammamish Presbyterian Church and invite the congregation and church leadership into conversation that shapes the next chapter of church life. The key observations and insights offered here - anchored in four framing themes - grow from a review of the Vital Church Ministry Report (VCMR) and the Ministry Area Profile, the Team's experience at SPC and conversations within the congregation. The Report is meant to begin a discussion with Session, Staff and the Congregation that will create a blueprint for church life and aid the Pastor Nominating Committee's deliberations.

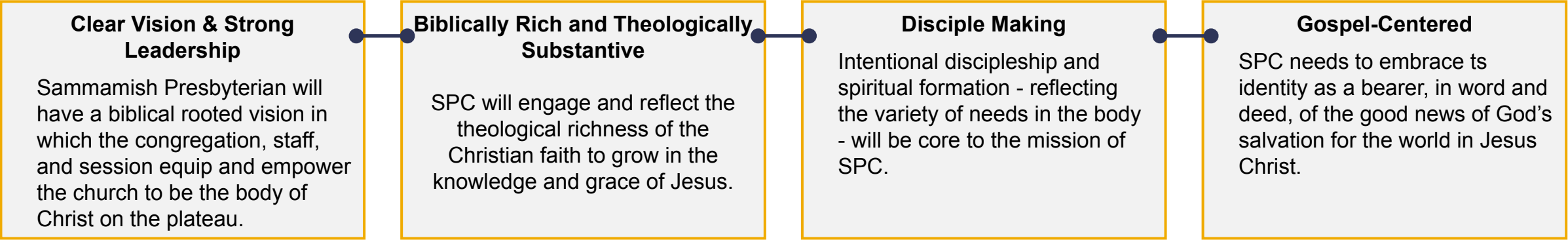
Sammamish Presbyterian Church is a friendly, welcoming body of Christians sustained by the hard work and faithfulness of longtime members who have labored, and continue to labor, to support the church and its ministries. The Church has a rich history (see historical summary in appendix) and is well-regarded on the plateau. In addition to an openness to self-examination, church staff are working faithfully to serve the body and map a path forward post-Covid.

Current findings suggest that SPC needs to regain confidence in its role as a bearer and proclaimer of the Good News of Jesus Christ to a broken world. As observed by the VCMR, "SPC has taken on the traits of an institutional Church, which occurs when a church moves away from an outward focus (of enthusiastic mission and evangelism) to an inward focus." In addition, there is a need to create paths of discipleship for adults and children in the church to experience and be shaped by the gospel. Further, there is opportunity for SPC to dig more deeply into the Reformed Tradition to shape adult education and church life. SPC is coming out of a uniquely challenging leadership transition. As such, there is a need to work toward a unified vision of SPC's purpose and mission, and hire a leader who can help the body cast a vision and together lead the church in the next chapter of our history together.

As our mission study team reviewed and processed the diverse set of inputs, clear themes emerged that suggest a path forward for SPC and the next phase of ministry. The intent of this view is to share the key elements and priorities that surfaced in this work.

SPC cannot continue in the ‘status quo.’

This was the singular conclusion of the Vital Church Ministry Report. Right now, for many people at SPC, church is something they fit into their week, but they are not sure how to put Jesus first in all things. SPC must recommit to putting Jesus first in all things, and attend to the voice of Jesus in corporate worship, in service to community and the world, in the way each person attending SPC sees their role in the world. God’s heart for SPC is radically simple, but this simplicity challenges us in the deepest places. Attending to the voice of Jesus in all that we do. It is our hope and prayer that we might become a prayer-filled, spirit-infused, Christ-centered, transformational community of God’s people. The following four imperatives are essential in creating healthy and vibrant church life moving forward.



Serve and Engage with our Community

Relevant to the needs of the Sammamish plateau
Digitally minded community, affluent, navigating key areas of life (i.e. marriage, family, security, finances, career, etc.), and exploring the cultural relevance of the church.

Serve and reflect the diversity of our community and the world
Enable the church, as the body of Christ, to serve the plateau and the world, regardless of age, mental/physical ability, gender, ethnicity, political preference, and sexual orientation.

Clear Vision & Strong Leadership

In the Vital Church Ministry Report, a majority congregants felt SPC lacks a clear and compelling vision. Only 43% of congregants and 44% of leaders “understand” the mission and vision of SPC. Notably, at the time of the survey, only 33% of staff felt they could name the vision. (70% is considered healthy for the church.) Many report the impression that, historically, church leadership was ‘chasing every shining object’ and “avoided hard decisions.” As a result, only 46% of the congregation, 59% of church leaders (elders and deacons) and 47% of staff had confidence that “Leadership can lead into the future.” (Here too, anything less than 70% is a low approval rating.)

Some of the reasons cited for this lack of confidence include: a failed building campaign, steady decline in church attendance, the abrupt and fraught departure of the former pastor, the challenges of Covid, and disagreement amongst church attendees regarding how these matters were handled. The result is that many attendees feel the church is “in a fog of corporate grief.” (Thankfully, the church scored very high in its willingness to allow for lamentation.)

It must be noted that in this setting church staff labored with integrity and skill and faithfulness, but the system was unhealthy, and even the very good work of many was unable to vitalize the system. It will be important moving forward to provide opportunity for church members to acknowledge and mourn the challenges of the past. It also true that 79% of the congregation, 87% of leaders and 93% of staff believe that the church “has good potential for growth in the future.” SPC is a church that acknowledges hard chapters but hopes to turn the page to a new story, and has hope in that story.

It will be critical moving forward that Church leadership creates a clear vision for the church and is able to communicate that vision to the congregation consistently and with specificity. Reflecting other comments, one survey respondent expressed the desire for “a strong leader who knows how to engage staff, work to create a vision for the church and have the ability to see it through. That sentiment is reflected in the data: 73% of the congregation, and 67% of leaders and staff favored a pastor as ‘leader’ rather than a pastor as “a close friend.” More succinctly, “all groups want a pastor who is a teaching leader who demonstrates faith by his/her life while pastoring SPC with wisdom and discernment.” What does it mean to collaboratively lead a congregation on the plateau to greater faithfulness?

Biblically Rich and Theologically Substantive

We live in a highly educated, spiritually diverse community. Therefore, SPC will need to present a theologically rich, intellectually engaging, substantive faith to engage residents – a faith they can live into with their whole selves. For example, a study of plateau residents reports a much higher than average interest in a worship service that is “intellectually challenging.” Christianity offers such a way. We must hold out Jesus, and give people a faith they can wrestle with, disagree with, and ultimately give their lives to. We know people are no longer interested in attending church simply because they always have, or because their parents were Christians. They need better reasons.

According to the VitalChurch Ministry Report, “SPC is weak in orthodox Biblical beliefs. In fact, these are the lowest scores VitalChurch has seen in years.” It’s fair to note that Vital Church’s understanding of orthodoxy may differ (perhaps significantly) from SPC’s. However, the report suggests, and comments from interviews confirm, that SPC would benefit from a transformative re-engagement in the the creeds and confessions of the Presbyterian tradition. This re-engagement is not merely academic. Rather, good theology is a form of prayer, rightly ordered. At its best, good theology is the fertile soil from which our lives of faith spring.

The birthplace of Christianity was a pluralistic, hedonistic society, brimming over the top with all kinds of spiritual options. We live in a similar time. And somehow, against all odds, Jesus made His way into the hearts of his followers in such a way that they gave their lives to follow him. SPC must teach - in word and deed - the fullness of that truth.

What would look like for Sammamish Presbyterian to become a place more willing to engage and wrestle with the theological tradition it has inherited? How might we practice the ways of Jesus, and engage the society around it with a sturdy, unswerving willingness to love everyone with radical generosity, and preach Christ Jesus crucified and raised, able to restore, redeem, and renew lives today, and every day?

Disciple Making

The Vital Ministry Report observes: “Churches that, for the most part, only attract well-churched people (as SPC does) sometimes have no organized plan of discipleship.” Overall, 61% of church survey participants say they feel they are growing spiritually. (Average for the survey is 74%.) In addition, only 23% seem to be aware of a discipleship process. Simply, discipleship as an idea or practice is not a part of SPCs identity. Yet it is an interest. In response to the question, “What do you want to achieve?,” programming in discipleship was a consistent theme:

“A discipleship program for new attendees and/or current believers who would like to grow in their faith.”

“More adult discipleship formation”

“More men’s and women’s ministries.”

90% of the plateau falls within the demographic labeled “Affluent Families” and “Young and Coming.” Consistent with this characterization, their primary concerns are: Achieving Long-term Financial Security (59.8%), Finding Time for Recreation/Leisure (31.8%), Achieving a Fulfilling Marriage (27.5%), Finding a Satisfying Job/Career (23%) It’s possible that the concerns ranked here don’t map, exactly, with those of SPC attendees, but we can assume that there is a substantial overlap. Therefore, continuing to strengthen our children and youth ministries and discipleship of them and their parents will be critical.

How does Sammamish Presbyterian Church engage residents of the plateau in these areas of concerns? How does the Gospel speak to, shape and challenge the plateau to see and seek holiness. If discipleship is helping form Christ in the lives of the the congregants, what does this mean in the light of a fast-paced, achievement-oriented, wealthy community?

Gospel-Centered

Many of the comments in the VitalChurch Ministry report expressed a desire for the church to return to first things, reclaiming its identity as the bearer of the unique Good News of God's salvation for the world in the person and work of Jesus Christ. More than half a million people live within 10 miles of SPC, an increase of 45% since 2000, and there is a deep interest of the congregation to to become a vibrant, worshiping community of faith equipped to reach, in word and deed, the diverse community of the plateau with the gospel.

- 81% of survey participants believe that they should be sharing their faith
- 99% of participants have "close, unchurched friends
- Yet only 50% feel "confident to share the gospel."

The following 'framing questions' may be helpful as the church plans for the future.

How can SPC "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?"

What does this look like in terms of our worship services?

How does this inform our disciple-making?

How does it shape our acts of service?

How does SPC grow and serve with existing partnerships in the community, for example: ESL, Issaquah Food Bank, World Vision.

How does it inform new ways of serving in the community?

How does SPC proclaim the gospel in a fractured and fracturing society, with tendencies toward tribalism?

How does SPC engage the plateau's diversity (age, race, ideology) with the good news?

"SPC is primarily attracting newcomers from 'chuched' background (97%) and more specifically, Protestant Churches"

Serve and Engage with our Community: Relevant to the needs of the Sammamish plateau

It's important for SPC to be tuned to the needs of the Sammamish plateau and surrounding communities. SPC resides in an affluent suburb, in the shadow of some of the world's most iconic companies, including Microsoft, Amazon, Starbucks, and Costco. The employees of these companies spend their days on the latest technology. As such, SPC should re-consider how it engages with these individuals.

- *Digitally minded:* They likely look at the website and social media on their iPhone for information on how to engage.
- *Virtual options:* When calendars get busy, or when traveling, it's great to have an option to participate in a church service virtually – a new norm that surfaced during the pandemic.
- *Podcast mindset:* If a sermon is missed, is there an option to listen to it via a podcast app?

As we transition to a post-pandemic time, people are reconnecting with the Church, with faith communities, and processing the changing nature of what it means to be a part of a worshipping community. They are reevaluating what is important to keep and what will change, while rethinking their relationship with their faith tradition. SPC has an opportunity to show up with *new relevance* where people can connect with Jesus in new ways.

Our theologically substantive and discipleship-focused church needs to meet people in their busy, hectic lives. They are navigating complexity with relationships, family, friendships, community, finances, career, security, and understanding their identity. They are also encountering diverse opinions, new perspectives, and provocative viewpoints through the never ending flow of communication. How can SPC be a *foundation and support* to them and introduce or reaffirm a relationship with Jesus?

Serve and Engage with our Community: Serve and reflect the diversity of our community.

The church serves in oneness and unity in Christ, regardless of age, mental/physical ability, gender, ethnicity, political preference, and sexual orientation. SPC needs to look for ways to allow ourselves to yield to a new culture of multi-ethnic congregation.

The Vital Church Report shows clearly our current membership is skewed towards a much higher percentage of Anglo-European: SPC identifies as 92% while our area is currently around 56%. The age demographics show SPC lacking in attendees from the Millennial Age group where the community is currently around 29% while our congregation is at 4%. The older demographic skews the opposite way with the area being at 14% and our congregation at 26% in the 50 - 70 year old age group.

Verbatim responses from our congregation:

- “New opportunities to connect and reach community”
- “Making newcomers feel welcome, attracting more young people, empowering the congregation to be responsible for welcoming new folks”
- “I wish SPC would grow to reflect the changes in of our community. The Plateau and Sammamish have really transformed in recent years in becoming more brown. I don't see that same translation in terms of the ethnic make-up at church, having taken place in our church”
- “Purposefully engage communities not represented in our church family.

What would it look like for each SPC attendee to identify ways to participate in the above areas to engage a diverse community?

Appendix: SPC History

SPC History: Where We Have Been

Birth: The Kennedy's Living Room

In June of 1984 Seattle Presbytery appointed Pastor Craig Thorpe to begin drawing together interested people from the rural east Sammamish plateau area. This led to two informational meetings, attended by 35 people, in Ed & Donna Kennedy's home. The group eventually began meeting at Sammamish Hills Lutheran Church for Sunday evening Bible study, worship and a Thursday evening midweek Youth Club. In October of 1984 Presbytery purchased the Inglewood Hill Road property. In June 1985, after many work parties to remodel the "church house" and grounds, Sammamish Presbyterian Fellowship began meeting for Sunday morning services in the basement of the Church house! Henk Wapstra was called as *Organizing Pastor* in August of 1985 and then we really began to grow. Nine months later, Presbytery purchased the double-wide trailer AKA "The Box"! The first service there was Mothers' Day, May 11th, 1986, with an average attendance of 70 - 100 people. Pastor Henk slowly guided the fellowship toward becoming an official church - mission statement, bylaws, budget, membership classes, education programs. Sammamish Presbyterian Church was chartered as the 55th church in Seattle Presbytery – November 9, 1986.

Growth: 1988 – 2008

Pastor Tyler Easley was called to SPC in May of 1988. His vision was to share his passion for Christ with the growing Sammamish community. That growth could be seen throughout the 1990's and 2000's, both in the church and on the Sammamish Plateau. During Tyler's 19 years at SPC the church membership grew from 153 to over 700. In 1995 a new sanctuary was constructed that seated 200. Two subsequent building campaigns in 2001 and 2003 allowed the campus to grow to a 700-capacity sanctuary, a fellowship hall, 4 classrooms, a large kitchen, and a modular office building.

SPC had become a Christ-centered entity devoted to "***Sharing the Good News***" in our community and beyond. With increased staff, the church developed a strong commitment to educating and nurturing its children, youth, families and seniors through a variety of weekly programs plus involvement in missions at home and abroad.

Continued Momentum: 2009 – 2022

Jeff Lincicome was called as senior pastor to SPC in 2009. The congregation had become a vibrant church family who cared for each other, had a passion to grow spiritually, and to serve. "***Knowing God, Growing Together, and Doing Something About It***" became our new mission statement.

Midweek programs of education, nurture, and care continued such as VBS, GROW, Small Groups, SPC University Classes, Stephen Ministry, Alpha, Senior Luncheons. SPC's missions expanded locally, nationally, and internationally. We shared our presence, our resources and our tangible care with Issaquah Food & Clothing Bank, Teen Feed, Life Wire, Campbell Farm, building houses with DOXA in Tijuana, World Vision, Swaziland, Eswatini, Citrusdal in South Africa, and refugees in Greece. We strived to be a "***Christ Centered Mission Minded Family***."

In 2016, SPC launched a very successful "English as a Second Language (ESL) program. This was to support the culturally diverse population on the Sammamish Plateau.

During and throughout the Pandemic, SPC was able to adapt and technically keep pace with current technology and communication advances.

Timeline

The following timeline shows some of the significant events of these past 38 years.

1984	First gathering of Sammamish Presbyterian Fellowship
1985	Henk Wapstra call as Organizing Pastor
1986	Purchase of Inglewood Hill property Chartering of Sammamish Presbyterian Church
1987	Building E added
1988	Tyler Easley called as Senior Pastor
1990	Completion and Dedication of Annex remodel for Sunday school and nursery
1993	Groundbreaking for new sanctuary
1995	First service held in new sanctuary
1996	10-year anniversary – Dedication of cross at front entry of Sanctuary
1997	Playground built
2001	“Dare to Dream” Building Campaign for 1 st Sanctuary Building
2003	“Raise the Roof” Building Campaign for 2 nd Sanctuary Building
2004	Completion of modular office Building C
2005	Completion and dedication of newest Sanctuary
2006	Glory Days Preschool founded
2009	Jeff Lincicome called as Senior Pastor
2010	Tijuana Doxa Mission trips began
2016	ESL starts
2020-2022	COVID 19 Pandemic
2021	Jeff Lincicome steps down as Senior Pastor