

First Presbyterian Church Dixon, Illinois Missional Analysis Process (MAP) Report

One of the initial steps required by Blackhawk Presbytery in calling a new pastor, the Missional Analysis Process, was completed in May 2009. Open to the entire congregation, a series of eight two-hour gatherings were held after worship services. The meetings were facilitated by Pat Wakeley of Blackhawk Presbytery. They spanned a four-month period, with an average attendance of 37 members. Committee members were Wendell Ebbens, Margaret Green and Carolyn McBride. Interim Pastor Melany Hamilton served as advisor.

Who Are We

First Presbyterian Church, Dixon, Illinois, was organized in 1853. The attractive stone building we still occupy was built in 1866 and has been updated with several renovations. The bell tower is visible to anyone traveling the main highway through Dixon. Traditionally, the church has attracted a large number of professional people and community leaders, and has been committed to local and world-wide mission. We have 181 active members as of the end of 2008. The average member's age is roughly sixty, and the congregation is almost exclusively middle-class, white, non-Hispanic.

Average Sunday attendance is eighty-six. The 9:30 a.m. worship service is followed by fellowship and Sunday school. Classes for children are divided into three age groups; numbers are small but those attending are regular. Two adult classes are well-attended. Christian education enrollment for 2007 was thirty-seven. Presbyterian Women meets monthly and holds a monthly Bible study.

Church staff includes a full-time pastor, half-time secretary, half-time custodian, a salaried organist and a salaried choir director.

Our Core Culture

Our members are a homogeneous group who value the relationships the church nourishes. Under the guidance of the Inner Mission Committee, shut-ins receive regular visits from church members and receive tapes of church services. Committee members strive to show care and support to members needing assistance. In addition, an informal network of members provides help for those who are ill or having other difficulties. Dinner groups provide the opportunity to strengthen relationships and make new friends.

Social gatherings, including the weekly coffee hour after Sunday services, find members chatting and laughing. There is a palpable sense of family and acceptance among all ages.

The congregation has historically placed mission as a high priority of the church, and still earmarks a percentage of the annual budget for mission purposes. The

church makes yearly contributions to each of approximately thirteen local organizations with varying missions. We provide support for the Dixon Food Pantry, donated cleaning supplies for the Iowa flood disaster in 2008, and have sent many care packages to those serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. We are currently assisting a missionary family serving in Thailand. Ten percent of our yearly income goes to mission at the General Assembly, Synod, and Presbytery levels.

The church regularly organizes volunteers for Meals on Wheels, the PADS homeless shelter, Habitat for Humanity, and the Red Cross Bloodmobile, which we regularly host. Individual members are involved in many community volunteer activities.

Members express deep appreciation for the excellent music provided by the choir and organist. The choir sings weekly except during the summer months, when members and guests provide “special” music. In April of 2009 the choir presented a Maundy Thursday cantata for church members and the community.

Enacted Beliefs

We see ourselves as a church that responds to God’s love and care by sharing that blessing through worship, study, a ministry of caring, and mission. We strive to be examples of God’s unconditional love to our congregation and beyond.

Assets

First Presbyterian is blessed with many physical assets, including its central location. We are located two blocks from the downtown business area and across from the Lee County Court House to the north and the Lee County Courts Building to the west, with a residential neighborhood to the east and south.

Between 1992 and 1999, the congregation funded a major renovation of the sanctuary, narthex, seven classrooms, offices, nursery, and social hall. The sanctuary has flexible seating for approximately 220 people. Two adjacent buildings were demolished and a parking lot surrounded with professional landscaping was added. Since then, improvements include a handicapped accessible bathroom, an elevator, a media room, and the addition of a fireplace and library to the parlor area. The building is in good repair and the sanctuary and social hall are air conditioned and equipped with an up-to-date sound system and a hearing aid system. The congregation has approved fundraising to purchase an audio/visual system for the sanctuary.

In 2001, the organ was rebuilt and upgraded, creating a 25-rank pipe organ; the console was replaced with a new Rodgers organ, creating a blended pipe and electronic instrument capable of performing classical as well as contemporary styles of music.

Additional music equipment includes an electronic keyboard, grand piano, hand bells and chimes, and two additional pianos.

Financial assets include a New Covenant fund, a foundation fund, a scholarship fund designated for seminary students, a memorial trust whose earnings go to Stronghold, and several other funds set aside for specific expenses. We also hold a sizable fund designated for a local mission project. In the past several years, we have borrowed from the New Covenant fund to meet operating expenses. However, the church has no debt, and owns four properties on the block for future use. One lot is vacant, and three properties are currently rented out.

Our most important assets are our caring and committed members, who generously share their considerable gifts as spiritual leaders, teachers, musicians, and committee members. Members volunteer their expertise in many areas, including cooking, computer technology, carpentry, art, writing, photography, and building maintenance. We have a deep base of retired people who share their life experience, wisdom, and skills and who act as role models for younger members.

Our Community

Dixon is the Lee County seat, with a population of 22,000 people (including a six-mile radius beyond the city limits), whose average age is 38.8.

The town is divided by the Rock River and boasts over twenty-five park sites, several of which provide views of or access to the river. Lowell Park, where President Ronald Reagan served as life guard for seven summers, is on the National Historic Register and is over 100 years old. The park district maintains many miles of recreational trails.

Dixon is just 18 miles from Stronghold, a four-season conference, retreat, and camping center operated by the Presbytery of Blackhawk. Our church had a significant role in the development of Stronghold and has continued to provide strong support and leadership.

The city's average home price in 2007 was \$136,800 and the median was \$122,224. The property tax median was \$1,458.

Dixon's public school system includes three grade schools, a middle school, and a high school. In addition, the city has two Catholic grade schools and Faith Christian School for students from pre-school through high school. Sauk Valley Community College is an accredited 2-year school located six miles west of the city. Dixon is also just 50 miles from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb.

KSB Hospital, located in the center of town, is an 80-bed acute care facility with a full range of services. A small airport services the area.

We are a two-hour drive from Chicago, and an hour's drive from two larger metropolitan areas, Rockford, Illinois to the northeast and the Quad Cities to the west. Dixon is a Main Street Community and offers some unique cultural opportunities. An art gallery, The Next Picture Show, continuously presents juried art shows and offers art classes to children and adults. An independent book store, Books on First, is a popular gathering place for browsing, chatting, and enjoying a cup of coffee. Nearing completion is Heritage Crossing, a two-block section of Dixon's historic downtown riverfront that will provide a scenic, pedestrian-friendly outdoor gathering place. The Canterbury Music Society offers free classical music concerts throughout the year, featuring professional musicians and a choir of local singers. The Sauk Valley Community Concert Series offers four concerts each year with a variety of professional musicians and musical styles.

More information about Dixon can be found at www.city-data.com/city/Dixon-Illinois.html

Our Vision

Like many mainline churches, our membership has declined since the 1970s; that may have caused our struggle, during the MAP process, to redefine our vision. We agreed that we belong to God, as his children, and that we are collectively and individually the body of Christ, with many God-given gifts to share with each other, the community, and the world. We know there are needs in the community that we could meet. We have members with impressive gifts, and with effective leadership the church could be much more actively involved in “hands on” local mission. We need some lessons in implementing and accepting change.

In thoughtful discussion about our theological center, we determined that we have not often discussed the “big issues” from the pulpit or formally in the congregation. We tend to avoid confrontation on matters of theology, although we do use the church’s formal structure in an effort to resolve issues and believe we have a healthy respect for each other. We recognize our need for pastoral leadership that will engage us in discussion and understanding of important issues and questions.

What/How Are We Doing Now

Our discussions on the relative “health” of First Presbyterian Church, Dixon, as compared to characteristics of thriving faith communities revealed strengths, weaknesses, and some initial ideas for improvement.

Empowering Leadership—When possible, we strive to match members’ gifts and interests as, for example, we choose session members for specific committees, develop a pool of liturgists, and recruit teachers and discussion leaders. While the church is blessed with members with impressive gifts in various areas, many leaders are getting older and/or “burned out.” We recognize the need to do more toward recruiting, training, motivating, mentoring, and encouraging a new group of leaders.

Functional Structures—We have an adequate building, parking lot, and location. Possible improvements include a covered walkway from the parking lot to the narthex entrance and creative use of our rental property. Some internal structures need addressing; for example, the 15-member session is large for our congregation’s size. The administrative manual and staff job descriptions need to be updated. With decreasing contributions from members, the budget and stewardship process must be reviewed in terms of what we want to accomplish. Our diminished church school may be the most serious and pressing challenge. We also need to increase and improve communication among staff, session, committees, groups, and the congregation through our newsletter, website, e-mail, etc.

Loving Relationships—This may be our strongest area. MAP participants gave high marks for our efforts to express our love and concern through personal and church contact (cards, visits, etc.) and through fellowship groups. We saw room for improvement in mentoring new members and interaction with visitors.

Holistic and Nurturing Small Groups—Even our working groups, such as the mailing crew, and the informal groups that meet as needed to accomplish a task feel cohesive and enjoy each other. Although our Bible study groups are not well attended, the dinner groups, men’s breakfast, fellowship events, the adult Sunday school classes, committees, and choir were seen as nurturing. A new marriage enrichment class is going well. We need to work on inviting more people, members and outsiders, to our small group gatherings.

Need-oriented Evangelism—Participants agreed that as a church we have much room for improvement in this area, although the church has held neighborhood picnics, supports local mission, and provides volunteers for organizations like Meals on Wheels and Habitat for Humanity. We recognize that many of our individual members evangelize through their volunteer work.

Inspiring Worship—Participants generally believed we are doing a commendable job in this area, with authentic worship that is carefully thought out by our worship planning team to incorporate good preaching and inspirational music into a service that helps members prepare for the week ahead.

Our Best Match

We believe that our next pastor will place the preaching of the Word as his/her highest priority.

We expect that the preaching of the Word will lead us as a congregation to a vision of how best we can serve others in our own congregation, the community of Dixon and the world.

We understand that a vision without action is merely words and to that end we are ready to work with our new pastor in carrying out this vision with the same love, compassion, enthusiasm, and sense of humor that they would bring to our congregation.

We acknowledge that the pastor and congregation are charged with the organization and administration of the church and to that end both pastor and congregation are responsible for timely, open and honest communications.

We will provide the tools necessary for bringing the timeless message of Christ to a new technological world.

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Additional information as listed below can be obtained from committee member:

Margaret Green
(815) 284-2994

meg.jim.green@comcast.net

—Seven MAP meeting summaries prepared by facilitator Pat Wakeley.

—MissionInsite Demographic Report

—Report on First Presbyterian Church, Dixon, statistics 1997—2007 (Presbyterian Research Services)

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