

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH OF BETHLEHEM

MISSION *Study*

















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With gratitude

The Session of First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem thanks the Mission Study Team for their diligent work bringing this study to life.

Those members are:

Kate Arrington, Co-Chair
Kim Miner, Co-Chair
Janet Bickford, Member
Robert Hunsicker, Member
Mike Kimmel, Member
Bekah Masthay, Member
Judy Smullen, Member
Janet Stahl, Member

We also thank the following people for assisting with the Visioning and Storytelling activities: Phil Clauser, Jo-Ellen Darling, Linda Filipovits, Mike Jendzeizyk, Rev. Cynthia Simmons, Rev. Dr. Steve Simmons, Rev. Dr. Ginny Smith, Rev. Dr. Richard Smith, Jim Stahl, and Gail Watts.



Our Guiding Scripture: Matthew 8:23-27

And when he got into the boat, his disciples followed him. A windstorm suddenly arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves, but he was asleep. And they went and woke him up, saying, "Lord, save us! We are perishing!" And he said to them, "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a dead calm. They were amazed, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

This Mission Study report was approved by the Session of First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem on June 22, 2026 and the Churches in Transition Team of Mountain Laurel Presbytery on July 13, 2026

Executive Summary

Our Mission Study represents a collaborative, congregation-wide discernment process that captures the history, core values, and future vision of First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem (FPCB) during a season of transition.

Faced with an oversized facility and shifting demographics, the congregation is proactively navigating the sale and ground-lease of its 33-acre campus to support local senior and affordable housing, while preparing to temporarily "nest" with Christ Church United Church of Christ (Christ Church UCC) in January 2027, before returning to a new, right-sized facility on the existing property.



Driven by extensive visioning sessions and demographic analysis, the study outlines a strategic framework for the church's next chapter, focused on three core operational themes – for First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem to become more:

- relational
- mission-active
- community-integrated

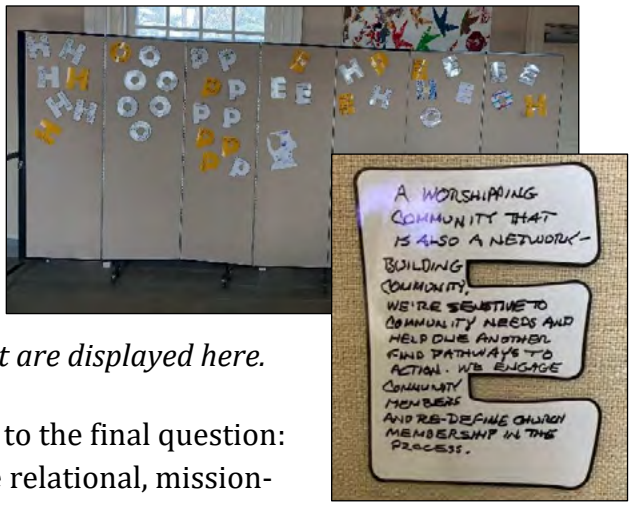
Ultimately, this document serves as a foundational roadmap to guide the congregation and align its ministries as it seeks a new pastor equipped to lead FPCB through this transitional wilderness into a faithful, sustainable future.

Process Overview

The Mission Study Team has been meeting faithfully each Wednesday since the end of February 2026. During that time, the Team designed a collaborative, consensus-building process that gives voice to the congregation's hopes, dreams, and memories.

For a first step, we invited folks to share pictures and stories of places in the building and on the grounds that were meaningful to them, as we prepare to leave a building we have been in since 1957. On March 21, the Team hosted a time for sharing. Members were given a period of time to move around the church building to places of significant personal meaning and take a picture.

These pictures, or others brought from personal albums for the event, were shared in small groups along with the story of their significance. You can view the online album here: bit.ly/4wrFM5f.



To hear the congregation's vision for the future, we held more than 15 facilitated visioning sessions, including interviews with those who worship exclusively online; more than 100 people participated. The sessions elicited answers to five questions (see Appendix A) that were transcribed and summarized. *Participants also shared their visions and hopes on the letters H-O-P-E, some that are displayed here.*

Three themes arose from the individual answers to the final question: our membership dreams of a church that is more relational, mission-active, and community-integrated.

A presentation of these visions, along with community needs and demographic information, was shared at a May 17 retreat attended by more than 80 people. As part of the retreat, participants brainstormed concrete activities that would embody the desire for relationship-building, active mission, and deeper community integration.

We analyzed the many proposed activities, extracting five initiatives for each theme. Over the next two Sundays (May 24 and May 31), the congregation was asked to rank their top three initiatives for each theme – this information is shared in the Where is God Calling Us section and in Appendix B.

It has been and continues to be important to the Team and Session that the congregation has a strong voice in the development of the Mission Study. In the subsequent sections, we present the story of First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem (FPCB) – our history, our community, our congregation, our resilient nature as we remain in transition, our current mission and activities, and where we feel God is calling us.

Where We Are

A Brief Church History

The story of FPCB begins in 1875 when a small group met in a borrowed YMCA room and decided to form a church.

Since then, FPCB has undergone many changes across its 150-year history, moving to a chapel financed in part by a Philadelphia philanthropist to a first church building near the center of Bethlehem *(pictured)* to, finally, in 1957, a building on a 33-acre plot with plenty of parking and lawns and a high steeple church. That building was expanded with the construction of the Kirk Center, including classrooms for children and a gym, in 1994.



Over the years, in addition to becoming a home for the Bach Choir and other cultural and community events, we have been blessed with extraordinary pastoral leadership. The church had robust children and youth programs, supported an array of missions both local and global, and started a Preschool, subsidized in part by the church to keep the tuition reasonable.

Our music program was central to FPCB worship and congregational engagement. At its height the program included five choirs from Preschool-aged children through elementary, middle, and high school choirs, with the Chancel Choir of adults. We are still known for our commitment to "K-groups" – Koinonia groups – small gatherings of members, unique at the time for a large church, as a means to create intimacy and facilitate spiritual growth and service.

But we have had challenges, too. First, reflecting the larger contraction of membership in "mainline, tall steeple" Protestant churches, across the nation, FPCB after 2006 could no longer support as many missions as it had. Moreover, as the country has faced increasing division, we have survived a schism in 2017 where a group of church leaders attempted to take FPCB out of the PC(USA) without following the discernment and separation process defined by what was then the Lehigh Presbytery (now the Mountain Laurel Presbytery).

Following serious, sustained thought and discussion, a group called the Presbyterians for Unity sought to keep the church together, to no avail. As a result, our congregation of more than two thousand is now several hundred. Faced with a building far too large for our purposes and needing $3 million just to keep it functioning, we have spent years looking for alternatives to selling the property.

At present, we are in the process of negotiating to sell +/- 18 acres, which includes the building, to a Presbyterian builder of senior housing that already owns and operates a retirement community adjacent to our property. The remaining +/- 14 acres will be ground leased to an affordable housing developer.



We plan to return to a portion of that acreage (that also includes our Memorial Garden) in the next three to five years, through the efforts of a yet-to-be-determined design team *(that parcel is outlined in yellow in the upper left).* In transition, the congregation is moving in January 2027 to "nest" with Christ Church UCC, located a few miles south of our current location in downtown Bethlehem.

Though a smaller and aging congregation (we do have a number of young families, too), we are a much closer community than before the schism, still blessed with enthusiastic pastoral and lay leadership.

The broad involvement of members both within the church and beyond is a remarkable testament to the power of the Holy Spirit. Though saddened to leave our building after so many years, we are blessed with a renewed commitment to each other, to our community, to mission – to being Christ's hands and feet in the world.

Our Bethlehem Community

FPCB is located in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, which is situated at the heart of the Lehigh Valley (population ~700,000), home to a resilient and evolving population. Founded by Moravians who continue to be a major part of the community, the city's identity remains grounded in its white working-class roots, built by generations of immigrants who arrived to labor in the steel mills and other heavy industries that shaped the region.

Today, however, Bethlehem has transformed into an even more richly diverse, multicultural community: approximately 56% White, nearly 30% Hispanic or Latino, around 8% Black or African American, and 3% Asian. This racial and cultural diversity mirrors the city's distinct generational footprint, which weaves together a large cohort of university students, young families, and a rapidly expanding population of retirees and older adults.

Over the recent past, Bethlehem has pivoted from its historic reliance on heavy industry to a diversified, modern economy. The closure of Bethlehem Steel marked the end of an industrial era, but it catalyzed a remarkable urban revitalization, epitomized by the

transformation of the old mills into the SteelStacks arts campus and a bustling tourism sector, alongside the rapid growth of major healthcare, technology, and logistics networks.

This economic evolution was further accelerated by a post-pandemic influx of new residents, drawn both by relatively more affordable costs of living and Bethlehem's distinct cultural charm and community appeal. However, this rapid growth has also brought a significant supply crunch: soaring demand has sharply driven up home prices and rental rates, placing new financial pressures on many long-term residents.

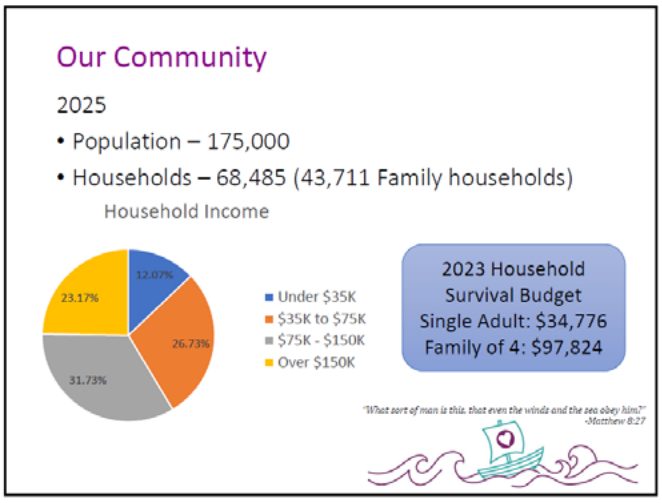
Bethlehem's contemporary landscape has also grown from its deep historical legacy. From the city's founding on Christmas Eve in 1741 by Moravian missionaries, its core has centered on community, education, and music—a heritage globally recognized by the recent designation of the Moravian Church Settlements as a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The city is home to prestigious academic anchors, including Lehigh University and Moravian University, alongside the Bethlehem Area School District and private religious and independent schools and academies. Two premier regional healthcare systems, St. Luke's University Health Network and Jefferson-Lehigh Valley Health Network, serve Bethlehem and the surrounding Lehigh Valley.

This intersection of history and modern infrastructure fuels our cultural identity; widely known as "Christmas City USA," we host events like Musikfest in August and Christkindlmarkt in December that annually draw hundreds of thousands to our community.

While Bethlehem boasts these cultural and economic assets, local health and housing assessments reveal critical challenges. The city is currently facing an affordable housing crisis, characterized by a rental vacancy rate below 2%—well below the 6% to 8% threshold considered healthy.

Close to 50% of households in Northampton County live below the ALICE threshold (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed): neighbors who work—often multiple jobs—but earn above the federal poverty level, making them ineligible for public assistance, while still struggling to afford basic necessities.



Further, regional health profiles highlight significant gaps in mental and behavioral health, with over 40% of surveyed local residents reporting multiple poor mental health days monthly, alongside challenges in food insecurity and chronic disease management (such as asthma and diabetes) that disproportionately impact lower-income and marginalized neighborhoods (see Appendices C and D for links to demographic data and community needs assessment).

Who We Are

Congregation

FPCB, more than 150 years later, is a vibrant, progressive Presbyterian congregation of about 250 members, with an average of 125 members in services week to week, who are deeply committed to one another and to living out our faith through radical hospitality and action (see Appendix F).



"Expansively welcoming" to all, we are actively seeking to grow our community and deepen our diversity, believing that a multitude of voices and backgrounds reflects the true heart of God and broadens our integration with our community. Driven by a knowledge of community needs and a passion for social justice, we don't just preach the Gospel—we live it out by challenging systemic inequality, advocating for the marginalized, and working tirelessly to build a more just, inclusive, and compassionate community for everyone.

Much of our congregation can be classified as empty nesters, with the majority of our members 50 and older, retired, and, at this time, primarily white. Though the majority attend services and mission activities in person, some members are able to attend only online, so we work hard to ensure we are accessible to anyone who would like to participate.

A large percentage of our members have been in the congregation for decades, but in the last four years, we have added 31 members, including some families with children. We are fully committed to the belief that our service, work, and mission are valuable whether or not they result in new members walking through our doors.

Our congregation is anchored by four Core Values (see Appendix E):

- We are **Christ-Centered**, seeking to embody the love and grace of Jesus in all that we do.
- We nurture **An Inquiring Faith**, embracing honest questions, intellectual curiosity, and a lifelong journey of spiritual discovery.
- This belief fuels **An Active Faith**, compelling us to step outside our walls to fight for social justice and serve our community.
- Above all, we are **Expansively Welcoming**, opening our hearts and doors wide to celebrate diversity and ensure that every person—regardless of background, identity, or story—knows they truly belong here.

FPCB - A Congregation in Transition

We are a congregation in transition, both "informed" and "reformed and always to be reforming according to the will of God." Well aware of the nationwide decline in church attendance and the closing of many mainline church doors, we know we are part of the trend.

Rather than cling to replicating the model of church that we have inherited and that has served thousands of FPCB members well for decades, we continue to choose to explore what it means to live a more active faith that is Christ-centered in this generation, and in these times of social, cultural, and geopolitical change in the Lehigh Valley and beyond. We embrace the definition of the "church": not as a building but rather as the people who ascribe to our Core Values and who seek to live them out *(pictured: the Children's Sermon).*



As a congregation, we are exploring the foundations of our faith and what it means to live into the "Kin-dom of God" today, through small group discussions, quiet reflection, and/or artistic responses to the sermon message. There is wide participation in Sunday classes and Koinonia groups (K-groups), open and interested communities exploring meaning and purpose in the context of our history and faith.

What does an authentic community look like for people who interact mainly through digital media or who question the integrity of Christian religion when they see scandals and close-minded bigotry in the news? How do we "love" our neighbors who have been hurt by the faith in the past or when they are not just of another denomination but are immigrants, speakers of other languages, or adherents to other faiths – or none?

While we are grieving some of the changes we face in the coming year, we look forward to the opportunity to "reform" ourselves in the new spaces and with the expanded communities we will encounter. We hope to carry our love for choir music, for praying and caring for each other, for active participation in social justice organizations and social welfare programs, and for engaging in Biblical studies and spiritual practices into our new place in which all people of each generation may feel welcome and allowed to flourish.

As mentioned before, our current congregation is predominantly “mature,” with a lifetime of experiences and expertise and the time, the energy, and the desire to be actively involved in the community. Rather than paying a “staff” to carry out the functions of the church community and programs for those in need, we as the congregation are ready to participate with our neighbors in healthy and healing communities.

What We Do

Worship and Spiritual Formation

Our worship and spiritual formation reflect the diversity of our backgrounds, experiences, and education. While maintaining the traditional worship experience with its hymns and music and liturgy, as well as a time for reflection following the sermon, we have experimented with a more contemporary worship style as well, one we call “Holy Ground,” a more informal service where folks gather around tables of six to eight, with a comfortable place for small children. Following the sermon is a time for conversation or meditation and then a communal sharing of the communion elements.



One unique aspect of our community is the number of spiritual directors who are available for ongoing counseling and who develop retreat days. On Sundays two very active groups meet for Christian education between services to study various topics relating to our spiritual journey—“Hearts N Minds” (an adult education group) and “Body N Soul,” our intergenerational program offering *(pictured).*

As noted, our K-groups (koinonia) or small sharing groups have, for many years, been foundational places for spiritual formation and fellowship. We also provide a number of opportunities for fellowship, such as lunch gatherings, evening teaching, and have recently offered an online bible study.

Mission and Ministry

Our mission and ministry to the community also reflects our diversity. Members offer their time to tutor at a local elementary school. A group called "Helping Hands," in which our members participate, takes mission trips to disaster areas to help with recovery. We participate in "She Nailed It," a local fundraising event for Habitat for Humanity *(pictured)*. We volunteer regularly at the local Bethlehem Emergency Shelter, preparing meals, staffing shower facilities, cleaning up, and offering services of ongoing maintenance of the building.



We partner with other Lehigh Valley Presbyterian churches to be a welcoming presence at local Pride events. Our church hosts an Overcomers Outreach program. On another level, we have been helping support an Afghan family with their needs as they seek citizenship.

Members of the congregation support several projects on behalf of those who are food insecure: delivering "Meals on Wheels," hosting a community garden whose produce goes to a local food pantry, raising funds for Crop Walk and supporting Bread for the World, and, starting in January of this year, securing donations of non-perishable foods and personal care items that are delivered to a different community food bank each month. In addition, FPCB is a founding member-owner of the Bethlehem Co-op Market, slated to open later in 2026, to provide a grocery store open to all neighbors in an underserved part of the community.

We host the Hi Neighbors program, a weekly public speaker series that is free and open to the public, featuring an interesting array of topics such as history, local culture, music, and current events. On average, 60 people from all over the community attend each of the approximately 18 sessions offered each year.

FPCB is also an active part of the Bethlehem Interfaith Group (B.I.G.), composed of Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Ba'hai congregations (so far!) in the Valley. We have shared Thanksgiving meals, taken "faith crawls" to varied houses of worship, and engaged in fellowship and community projects.

Memorial Garden

A Memorial Garden, where many members' cremains are interred, is a lovely space which has sometimes been used as a part of special services or retreat. This sacred space will remain on the property in perpetuity.

Preschool



Since the 1960s we have supported a highly respected and active Preschool on campus, as a part of our community outreach *(pictured: the Summer Splash program)*. We will continue to support this ministry. The program will remain onsite through May 2027 for their 2026-27 school year, as they seek and transition to a new space.

Leadership, Staffing and Finances

Our Leadership Structure: Throughout our transition, we have been blessed with strong leadership. A 15-person Session acts as the spiritual leaders while attending to the operational needs and mission of the church, delegated currently to eight committees that oversee finance, property, worship, community life, personnel, and our Preschool, as well as a fund endowment committee that recommends grants made from endowment funds gifted to us for mission, music, education, and children's activities and programs. (See Appendix G for more information about committees and their work during the past year.)

During our transition, a separate Mission Strategy Steering Committee has guided us since 2022 in exploring the best use of our 33-acre campus and 100,000 square feet of building. While this committee's work will conclude before the end of 2026, two Next Chapter teams have formed, one to guide our next steps as we move to a temporary location, and another for the Preschool as we search for a new location as mentioned above.

Our 11-member Board of Deacons concerns itself with the care of our congregation, visiting our at-home folks and hospitalized members on a regular basis and providing home communion. We also offer a card ministry and assistance with meals and transportation.

Staffing: Currently the church staff includes a Transitional Pastor, an Associate Pastor, a Music Director, a Facilities Manager, three part-time Facilities Personnel, an Office Manager, a part-time Finance Person, and a part-time Communications Coordinator. The Preschool staff includes a Director, an Administrative Assistant, and 16 teachers. As we transition out of our current space, those staffing patterns may change.

Finances: Though we have excellent giving participation from the congregation, the deferred maintenance needs of our building have necessitated larger draws on our endowment funds to cover operational expenses, including personnel and facilities.

The decisions made in the last year regarding the sale of buildings and grounds will yield the income necessary to live out our dream of affordable housing on our campus and will enable us to return to the campus and establish a more active mission and ministry program that we hope will continue to reach deeply into our Bethlehem community. As previously mentioned, an as-yet-to-be-formed design team will work on these intentions in the coming years.

Where is God Calling Us

As we continue to discern the future of FPCB, our journey forward is rooted in a deeply collaborative and prayerful Mission Study process. As noted before, the small group visioning sessions involved more than 100 members sharing their heartfelt hopes and dreams for the next chapter of our church's ministry and community life.

From these rich conversations, three themes naturally emerged: becoming more **relational**, **mission-active**, and **community-integrated**. To turn these visions into action, we held a congregational retreat where more than 80 participants brainstormed specific activities tailored to each theme. These ideas were then organized into key initiatives, and the wider church family was invited to vote on the directions that resonated most deeply.



The result of this shared discernment is a clear framework for our future - highlighting three specific areas for engagement under each of our three guiding themes.

Relational Church

- Small Groups and Interest-Based Fellowship
- Support Groups and Specialized Care Ministries
- Fellowship Meals and Community Dinners

FPCB has a strong, historical grounding in small group, circle-based connection models through our K-groups. We seek to build on this tradition through thoughtful expansion to different types of groups (e.g., multigenerational or life stages; spiritual direction) and an intentional focus on welcoming newcomers into group engagement right from the start.

Alongside this vision for church members, an expressed desire is to support compassionate spaces for mental health advocacy and recovery programs. Finally, we embrace the transformative power of gathering around the table where we envision living into the theology that God is truly present in our shared food and fellowship.

Mission-Active Church

- Mentorship, Youth, and School Partnerships
- Hands-On Service Days and Direct Relief
- ESL, Advocacy, and Immigrant Support

The congregation feels deeply committed to following the teachings of Christ through an active mission that draws on the skills and experiences of the congregation to address the needs of our members and the wider community.



As described earlier, we engage in a variety of missions, both through direct food and financial support and through sharing of our time and skills, from tutoring to building homes. Many of the activities identified by the congregation expand on these current programs, such as the mentorship program currently offered at Donegan Elementary School *(pictured)*.

These initiatives include advocating for local youth and fostering intergenerational "grandparent" mentoring; channeling our collective energy into tangible, physical outreach such as dedicated church-wide serve days; and responding directly to the demographic needs of our changing community through a focus on offering English as a Second Language classes, assisting neighbors with documentation navigation, and supporting bridges to local Spanish-speaking and migrant populations.

Community-Integrated Church

- Shared Spaces and Community Center Model
- Dedicated Institutional Alliances
- Arts, Culture, and Local History Integration

We believe that God is calling us to weave the life of our congregation deeply into the fabric, culture, and heritage of the wider Bethlehem area.

As stated before, we are in the midst of an ongoing effort to reimagine how we utilize our physical assets, not only to support affordable housing, but also to design a new church home that supports our outward mission.



That mission is strengthened through institutional partnerships with established and emerging connections that deepen our community engagement. Within such a space and in combination with our partners, we hope to build bridges beyond our typical Sunday membership by hosting high-caliber musical events *(pictured: Artefact Choral Scholars performance),* and offering unique cultural and social gatherings that welcome the broader public into community with us.

Together, these three themes—relational, mission-active, and community-integrated—are far more than a strategic roadmap; they are a living expression of FPCB's Core Values:

At our foundation, we remain resolutely **Christ-centered**, anchoring every new endeavor in the love and grace of God. Our relational focus breathes life into our commitment to be **Expansively Welcoming**, ensuring everyone finds a true place belonging here. Meanwhile, our mission-active and community-integrated goals put **An Active Faith** into physical motion, while our collaborative discernment reflects **An Inquiring Faith** that is unafraid to ask how God is calling us to evolve.

Armed with this clear sense of identity, our congregation is excited to begin the search for a new pastor who is energized by this vision. We look forward to welcoming a leader who will walk hand-in-hand with us into this new phase of our history, sharing a profound faith in our collective future and possessing the skills to help guide us there.

Our Next Pastor

As our church navigates its way through significant changes over the next three to five years, we look forward to calling a new Pastor who will welcome the unique opportunities and challenges of leading our congregation of eager and determined people through the wilderness to the Promised Land to which God is calling us, modeling Christ's teaching and engaging our congregation with each other and the world beyond.

As a congregation in transition, we will need a Pastor who thrives in uncertainty and ambiguity, buoyed by the support of a committed congregation that is facing this journey with hope and faith in the steadfast love of God and each other.

(Pictured: The words that emerged from the question, "Where is God leading this congregation?")



We seek a Pastor who embraces spiritual and pastoral leadership as an opportunity to be a role model of Christ's teachings in the church community and the world beyond. The Pastor will be a dynamic worship leader who is not only a talented preacher in traditional formats of worship, but also a willing participant in our experimental approach to worship. An important piece of this leadership will be as a discipleship builder who supports the efforts of our committed congregation members who guide our small group studies and Sunday morning faith formation classes.

A Pastor stepping into leadership and fellowship with our congregation will bring strengths in communication and community engagement. Our congregation values the importance of effective communication across a variety of settings from traditional interactions to modern technology.

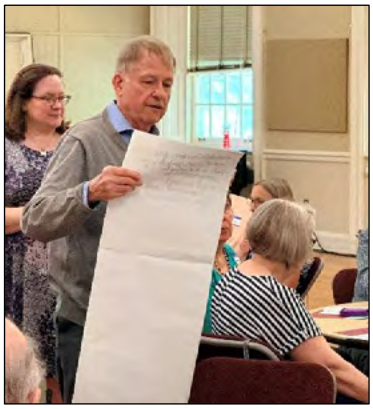
We seek a Pastor with a diplomatic and open-minded approach that encourages the open expression of diverse ideas and thoughts to live into our expansively welcoming values. We are dedicated to fostering a culture of hospitality and nurturing community outreach and expect that this Pastor will be ready to collaborate with elders, lay leaders, and missional partners to grow our community connections and support the local missions envisioned in this mission study.

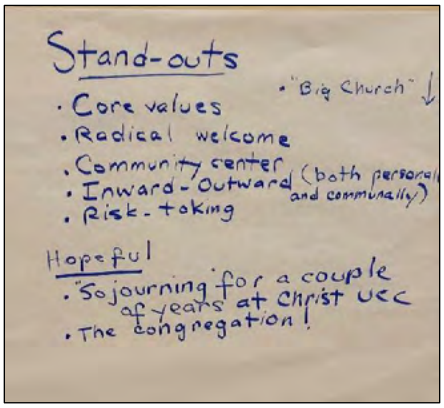
We are a church with many hands and hearts, and this Pastor will be asked to provide clear direction to those volunteers and staff. Vital to this pastoral role is the ability to empower and engage others, making each person feel that they matter, that they are important and valued.

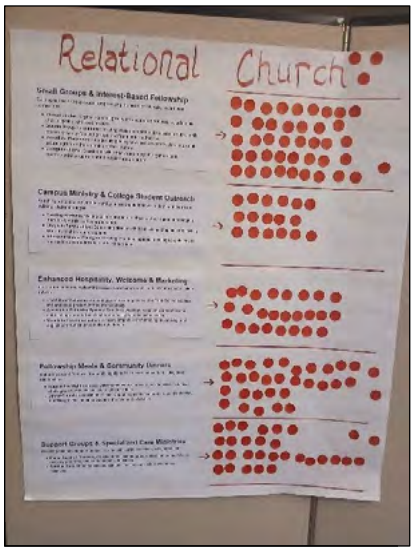
Conclusion

FPCB's story is one of determination, creativity, resilience, and hope. It is one that is rooted in our Mission Statement and Core Values. It is one that is lived through worship, mission and ministry, community involvement, and a deeply committed congregation. It is one where everyone's voice is important to hearing God's call. And, it is one that we see stretching out to wherever and whatever God is calling us.















Scenes from our May 17, 2026 retreat

Mission Study Appendices

Use this link: fpc-bethlehem.org/mission_study_appendices/
or scan the QR code with your camera phone

Appendix A: Visioning Session Questions
This is the process and questions used with congregants to identify their hopes, dreams, and vision for the future. The results of this exercise informed the development of a menu of possible initiatives for the future church.

Appendix B: Visioning Retreat Ranking Results
This document lists the three primary initiatives identified through the Visioning Session process: to become a more relational, mission-active, and community-active church. Congregants voted for the specific initiatives within each of the categories; note that the items highlighted in yellow are the ones that were selected.

Appendix C: Quick Insite (5-mile radius) Report
This report focuses on the five-mile radius around 2344 Center St., Bethlehem, and includes looks at a user-defined geography consisting of StoryView and ThemeView sections. The StoryView displays overall demographic information, such as population, educational attainment, median family income, and diversity. The ThemeView goes into more detail about the study area's demographics, changes over time, and Mosaic Lifestyle Segmentation Types.

Appendix D: Community Needs Report
This document shares demographic information about our community, and highlights key points of community need in our region, using themes developed from the visioning process to align our church vision with places for community impact.

Appendix E: Full Mission and Values Statement
The mission and four core values of First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem.

Appendix F: 2025 Statistical Report
A demographic overview of the FPCB membership.

Appendix G: 2025 Annual Report
The annual report for 2025, with commentaries from church leadership about worship, committees, finances, and programs.

Additional Resources

FPCB website
First Presbyterian Church Facebook
First Presbyterian Church Preschool Facebook
Bethlehem Area School District website
Discover Lehigh Valley website

First Presbyterian Church of Bethlehem
2344 Center Street
Bethlehem, PA 18017

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH OF BETHLEHEM

2344 Center Street
Bethlehem, PA 18017

610-867-5865

fpc-bethlehem.org

info@fpc-bethlehem.org