

Why are we here tonight?

Before we start our discussions tonight, let me talk about why we are here. We are here tonight to review how far we have come on our New Beginnings journey, but our gathering tonight is also about our continuing push for clarity: clarity about our faith; clarity about the needs of our neighbors; clarity about what actions we can start to take now to carry our faith as disciples of Jesus Christ to our neighbors in the community.

This is a continuation of the New Beginnings process we started about this time last year. We have communicated every step in this process in the newsletter, in Sharon's sermons and in gatherings like this. In the spring we received the finished New Beginnings report from an outside consultant, which assessed our current state and the nature of our surrounding community. We then held a series of small group house meetings to validate the assessment and to see if we had a consensus on how to move forward.

A group of our members, including session and regular members, put together a summary based on reports from the small groups. The summary report was issued in July. The New Beginnings process showed us that significant change is needed, that actual engagement with the surrounding community is necessary, and that our congregation needs to clarify who we are as a faith community before we can determine how God is calling us to be the witness of Jesus Christ's love for our corner of the world in Arlington, VA.

As a reflection of this, the summary report noted the following:

"The clearest message from the study is that *everyone recognizes that the church needs to set a new direction for change – quickly, within a few months.*"

"Although everyone recognizes that APC needs to change, there is no direction as to what the change should be and how it can be accomplished. None of the options for moving forward received a majority."

“This report group and some in the house meetings recommend that the Pastor and session seek immediate assistance from the Presbytery or the PCUSA in Redefining the Mission.”

“The [New Beginnings] assessment showed that our community is changing and diverse. The Mosaic groups of Young Cosmopolitans and Aspiring Hispania are the most prevalent... Participants in the house meetings recognized that currently we have little evidence of successfully relating to either of these groups.”

“The underlying question that emerges from many of the comments is whether APC leaders and congregation have the resources (spiritual, personal commitment and energy, and financial) to redefine the mission and introduce new participants to the faith.”

“During the house meetings, issues of communications and trust, suspicion and rancor were evident in several groups... It makes it most important that the process of identifying a new mission and deciding on sources of outside guidance or ways of developing new leadership approaches be carried out and communicated openly.”

In July and August, Tom and Libby Davidson also led a series of meetings around the issue of what it means to be Presbyterian which has helped us get further clarity about who we at APC are as a Presbyterian faith community.

The Session met on August 21, 2011 and engaged in an intensive process of discernment on next steps based on the input from the congregation through the house meetings. This time of discernment was led by the Reverend Shannon Kiser, Director of the Training Center for Innovative Church Leadership, PCUSA, and a trained New Church Development coach. Our work was surrounded by prayer and worship. We concluded that, given the desire for change coupled with the uncertainty about our future together and in the community, we need to give ourselves over to the leadership of the Holy Spirit and proceed as if we were starting a new church. We agreed that everything was on the table. In keeping with our “start a new church” model, we agreed to follow the approach in the book, *Starting New Churches*, not something we tried to invent although we are

adapting it somewhat to our circumstances and timelines.

To repeat what we have said before, we all had hope that the New Beginnings process would give us a clear direction, something we could begin working on immediately. We are experiencing our process in the Lord's time. We seem to be led one day, one step at a time into our future, just like the Israelites who received their manna from heaven necessary for that day and no more.

Two things are needed: ***a sense of our faith identity and commitments*** that will be the strength or "bread" for the spiritual journey on which God is leading us as congregation, and ***action in the community*** based not on our imagination in our building, but on direct encounter with our neighbors. Our source of strength is the faith with Jesus Christ at the center that we have among us; our future is out there among people we have not met. But in moving forward from the end of August, we first wanted to understand if there was enough of a common set of beliefs among us to make any agreed mission redefinition possible.

30 members and friends of the Arlington Presbyterian congregation gathered over the course of October 21 - 23 as the first step in redefining our mission as a faith community. Friday and Saturday were spent reflecting on the questions "Who is Jesus?", "What is Church?", "What is Evangelism?", "What is Salvation?", "What is Service?".

Three separate groups worked through these questions and brought their reflections to the larger group. Amazingly, what we experienced was that each group, thanks to the movement and power of the Holy Spirit, was aligned with the others on our beliefs and motivations. This was not because we have all been reading a common catechism, but because we have all been partakers of the same journey on the road with Jesus Christ over the last few years.

On Sunday, we worshipped God by getting out of these stone walls to walk, feel and listen to what happens in the neighborhoods around us on Sunday mornings. People walked and drove up and down the Pike and the surrounding neighborhoods. We just got a small taste, but there was shared sense that our church sits geographically in the middle of many demographic and cultural edges.

We are continuing to ask ourselves: How does the church help create, nurture, and encourage community while continuing to develop our identity as Presbyterians following our Lord and Savior? How do we make these thick stone walls that separate us from our neighbors permeable?

The October retreat generated a lot of positive and Spirit-filled energy. At the end of the weekend, it seemed that there was a consensus to proceed with mission redefinition. On November 20th, session met and discussed "what next?" Taking in what we heard, we identified the following four steps that we believe could lead us towards redefining our mission:

- Increased emphasis on internal spiritual nurture and growth – Sharon’s well-attended sermons and our Sunday Advent program were the first steps down that path and more is to come in our “Journey through Acts” study and as we soon enter Lent.
- We are discussing creating some type of "CUPS on the Pike" - in her November 13th sermon you may recall Sharon talking about how Leigh Peterson, a former APC Christian Educator, has inspired a vision for "CUPS on the Pike". Leigh works with CUPS - Communities United for Prayer and Service - in Lafayette, LA. Our CUPS could be different but we have started imagine a gathering place on the Pike, a coffee café where people from the community could gather for casual conversation and intentional conversations around specific topics (with guest speakers such as authors or community leaders). With others in the community we could flesh out ideas, such as a health ministry possibility that a few APC folks have had conversations about since the retreat.
- We want to take a few field trips to visit some other faith communities to help us see possibilities, to encourage, inspire and keep us energized - places such as CUPS in Lafayette, LA, Broad Street Ministry in Philadelphia, PA, Hot Metal Bridge Faith Community in Pittsburgh, PA, Church of the Savior (a "scattered community" of 9 small faith communities) in Washington D.C. We hope to start scheduling these soon.
- Asking the National Capital Presbytery to treat us as a new church development which means resourcing us as we continue with mission redefinition. We have engaged the folks at Presbytery and are working out the details of their engagement with us, but in the last few weeks we have already secured a commitment for support in identifying and paying for a

consultant to begin working with us on how we become a new missional church.

We are moving out. Tonight we are going to go back to do something we have yet to do. We are going to take the basic results of our retreat and start to digest and flesh out direction. We are doing this for two reasons. 1) We are going to identify the next steps that we will take from tonight. 2) We are going to use this time to prepare ourselves to work with an outside consultant to get the process moving quickly and to ensure that we get what we need to start building our church around a new mission.