



# **Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church Spiritual Discernment Council Mission Study**

**June 18, 2022**

## **Spiritual Discernment Council:**

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## Spiritual Discernment Report

*Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you to tend the flock of God that is in your charge, exercising the oversight, not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it—not for sordid gain but eagerly. Do not lord it over those in your charge but be examples to the flock. And when the chief shepherd appears, you will win the crown of glory that never fades away. 1 Peter 5:1-4*

*“We give thanks for all the gifts of Creation. Everything we need to live a good life is here on this Mother Earth. For all the love that is still around us, we gather our minds together as one and send our choicest words of greetings and thanks to the Creator. Now our minds are one.”*

Excerpt from the Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address

**Purpose:** Discern God’s yearning for Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church (PHPC) and propose a missional direction and priorities for the congregation consistent with the leadership of the Holy Spirit and Pebble Hill’s gifts. This anticipates the calling of a new pastor. This report will also be our mission study.

### **Who and When:**

- Ten of us met with Pastor Elizabeth for 2 hours, every other week from October 2021 to June 2022
- Steve Eidt, Kathy Fanella, Janine Bernard, Ron Cavanagh, Charlotte Haas, Tim Frazee, Deedee Elleman, Lennie Turner, Don Pair, Andrew Trapasso. Pastor Elizabeth Lyman as advisor and facilitator

**How:** We started each meeting with a short worship and were guided in the process by the book, Listen for God’s Leading: A workbook for Corporate Discernment by Valerie K. Isenhower and Judith A. Todd, Upper Room Books.

It was useful as it:

- Refocused us on God’s call and guidance of the Holy Spirit
- Helped us let go of preconceived ideas/past, personal issues
- Encouraged patience to listen to each other
- Provided a common terminology for the council

### **God’s Mission:**

In order to ground ourselves on the biblical basis of the church, we studied several scripture passages and the summary of God’s call to the church as interpreted in the Presbyterian Book of Order. The following is what we called God’s ‘Big Picture’ for the church.

*“The triune God creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people, bringing the Good News to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord’s favor upon all creation. In Christ, the Church participates in God’s mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God’s love, offering to all people the grace of God and calling all people to discipleship in Christ.”* Presbyterian Book of Order (2017-2019. F-1.01)

From this and other passages it is clear that the church is to 1) reach out and minister to all people in need and 2) help transform creation and humanity by proclaiming the good news and inviting all to discipleship. The emphasis is on an outward focus on others rather than an internal focus on congregations.

### **Our core questions**

From the Book, “Listen for God’s Leading”, we kept these questions in our hearts and minds during this process.

*What is God’s yearning for Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church?*

*What would God have us do?*

*How would God have us grow spiritually?*

*How would God have us change?*

### **The nature of our meetings**

The PHPC’s Spiritual Discernment Council meetings were an exploration of the sensed presence of “spirit.” We the council members and later, the broader participation of the church’s full membership, sought to discern how God’s Spirit was calling for us, yearning for us to act. The focus throughout was not on our particular ideas, desires, hopes or expectations for the future, but rather a more prayerful, meditative, listening for any directions that we might receive together from the spiritual presence in which we worked.

Meetings were all begun with prayer and a short meditation which drew us all into a focus on the needs of our world, God’s creation and creatures. We were asked to consider how PHPC’s open hands, hearts, and minds, had, is, and might in future, effectively serve the situationally unfolding gentle providence of God’s Love. Those of us who participated in these discussions were deeply touched by the sense of community that emerged in our concerted attempt to give expression to the intuited presence of God’s yearnings for PHPC.

Every effort was made in our meetings to give ongoing expression to concerns of “congregation as a whole” as collected in our small group meetings, emails, and private letters. The humility, candidness, and camaraderie of these SDC meetings bodes well looking forward to the spiritual future of PHPC and its attempt to discern, celebrate and serve the sensed presence of God in our Adventure of Life.

### **A History of Pebble Hill**

The facts of the history and evolution of Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church have been well documented by church historians throughout the years. Our Spiritual Discernment Council

underwent a process of walking through the years as we remember them and documenting our experiences and impressions as our lives were impacted by being part of this church. Through this process, we were able to add some important consideration of the human and spiritual history of the church and the nature of the people who made the church what it is today.

In 1951, a committee of local Presbyterians became interested in the formation of a church in the Eastern suburbs of Syracuse. No new Presbyterian church had been established in the Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery since the beginning of the 20th century. The Syracuse and Onondaga County Council of Churches approved the request. Multiple sites were considered for the new church, and in the spring of 1955, a six-acre property on Jamesville Road in Dewitt was selected. The property included a mansion to be used as the church and a smaller house for a manse. The founding pastor, Reverend Forster W. Freeman, was called, and the church was named Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church, chosen to reflect the popular name for the terrain of the area. In October of 1955, 24 members of First Presbyterian Church in Syracuse, and 32 members of Park Central Presbyterian Church were commissioned to join together to form the new congregation. We now see the courage and determination of these "pilgrims" as an important part of the foundation of our church. These were people who heard a call to leave the church which generations of their families had attended, where their children had been baptized, and their elders had been buried, in order to begin something new on a path God was showing them.

Reverend Freeman was installed as pastor in February of 1956 and served as pastor until 1969. He had a valuable gift of reaching out to the community and a welcoming personality. One of our members recalls that when her family was building their house near the church and didn't yet have electricity, Reverend Freeman approached them and offered to run an electric cord from the church to their building site. The family joined the church shortly thereafter and remain in our membership today. The first services in the new church were held in the large mansion on the site, which also contained the church offices. Sunday school was taught in the manse. One of our members recalls enjoying Sunday school in the big room in the manse basement. In 1963, a new sanctuary was constructed on the property, and the first service in the new building was held on Christmas Sunday of that year. Sadly, the mansion was destroyed by fire in November 1968.

From 1969- 1976, John Sisley was pastor. During this time, in 1970, an addition to the church was built which included classrooms, offices, and nursery rooms. The congregation was at its largest at this point, with two services on Sundays. There were several mission trips at this time, and the Muppies, a junior high group was active. Our esteemed music director, Bette Kahler joined us in 1972 and established a musical program which became known throughout Central New York, featuring a classical choral and organ repertoire and sharing our excellent acoustics with many fine local musicians. In addition to providing wonderful music, Bette has been a friend and caregiver to people of PHPC, from the youngest to the oldest, since her earliest time with us. Reverend Sisley left PHPC in 1976 to return to seminary. In later years, accusations were made that Reverend Sisley engaged in sexual misconduct with members of

the congregation. When this situation came to light in the early 90s, the session and church leadership took significant measures to help the congregation with healing.

From 1977 until 1984, John Wall was pastor. Julius Jackson was his associate. During this time, Christian Education and youth groups were active. Musicals were presented, and the Rial Symonds Peace lecture series was founded. Members of the congregation were active in the leadership of the Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery. John Wall departed in 1984, as he and session agreed he was not a good fit for the congregation. In 1984 and 1985, David Miller and Jon Regier served as interim ministers. The congregation continued to be active in the Presbytery.

In 1985, Don Brown was called as pastor and served until 1991. During this time, Adult Retreats were featured, the Homesick Restaurant began, and the choir was at a high point in size and skill. Choir presented the Boar's Head Festival and a performance of John Rutter's Requiem in collaboration with the choir of First Presbyterian Church. Don Brown retired in 1991. From 1991 through 1993, Steven Thomas was the well-respected interim pastor.

In August of 1993, The Reverend Dr. Peter Shidemantle was installed as pastor of PHPC and began his 26-year pastorate with us, until his retirement in 2019. Highlights of this time period included excellent adult forums, Reverend Shidemantle's fine sermons, several mission trips and adult retreats, our ongoing work serving meals at the Samaritan Center, our involvement with Interfaith Works, and the establishment of the beautiful Memorial Garden along the south wall of the church building. Meaningful Bible study was led by ministerial candidate, LarScenia Thomas.

The Christian Education program was active at this time, including Sunday school classes for various age groups and several trips by our young people to the Presbyterian Youth Triennium. However, there were conflicts with Christian education staff which resulted in the loss of some families from the congregation, as well as the loss of involvement in programs by several adults.

Reverend Shidemantle worked with Bette Kahler to establish a series of Jazz Vespers services, which drew in many guests from the community. The Fig Tree Assembly began. This was a seminar which brought noted theologians to PHPC to teach our congregation and community.

In the late 1990s, the PHPC Session began an intensive study of our ministry, community, and facilities. This led to the development of our Mission Statement: "To love and serve God and neighbor with open hearts, open hands and open minds." It was also decided to undertake a capital campaign and a design process to expand and renovate our church building. A groundbreaking ceremony for this project was held in June of 2003. The completed building provided additional office space, meeting areas, and classrooms, along with an elevator to access all floors of the building.

In 1997, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, USA was held in Syracuse, which required considerable involvement by our church in many aspects of this event. Reverend

Shidemantle retired in June of 2019, and our congregation was sorry to see him go and grateful for the leadership he had provided.

Since October of 2019, we have benefitted from the many gifts of our Transitional Pastor, Reverend Elizabeth Lyman. She was able to guide our church and keep us functioning through the many challenges of the COVID pandemic, helping us to develop creative ways of worship while we could not be together in the sanctuary. She led a recorded service each week, which people could access remotely. We developed Sunday afternoon “drive in” Vespers services in the parking lot, so people could gather in the safety of their cars. She assisted with the committee designated to explore and purchase live streaming equipment and helped us get started with our live streaming services each Sunday. Reverend Lyman has demonstrated extraordinary pastoral care during a period which saw the death of many of our cherished long-term members. She has helped to empower the session and make them more active. As our first female pastor, she has helped the congregation become introduced to new faces and methods of ministry.

Although we’re a relatively young church, PHPC has a strong history of rich worship, learning, and service. Our 71 years have not been all sunshine and roses. Like every organization, we’ve had our share of controversy, mistakes, and struggles. Some unfortunate incidents and inappropriate actions have tarnished the sheen of our memories and our pride. Yet, we continue to be proud of the work we’ve done, the growth we’ve achieved, and the generous, dedicated, and loving people we continue to be. We hope the next 71 years will see us following God’s leading toward a continuation of the strong history of Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church.

### **The demographics of our Community and Pebble Hill**

We spent an evening with our Resource Presbyter, Rev. Karen Chamis and explored our demographics and the survey we did in 2018 before Pastor Elizabeth came. This information is based on assessments by MissionInSite (2018), Holy Cow (2019) and PCUSA Community Demographics (2021). We also decided to come up with our own congregational conversation approach, rather than a structured survey tool.

#### **Congregational Demographics:**

Our 3-mile radius demographics represents a very diverse community with a population of approximately 80,000. We include middle and upper middle-class areas, Syracuse University, significant commercial areas and concentrated low-income housing and apartments. This leads to dramatically differing levels of income, racial and ethnic groupings, and educational levels across the area. Some areas are dominated with students and professors while others are significant areas of low-income housing and apartments with minimal education levels. There are neighborhoods in the more immediate areas of the church that have Bachelor or upper-level degrees with moderate to high incomes. There are six Presbyterian or United/Federated churches sitting on the fringe of our 3-mile radius. There is very little opportunity for growth in either households or population over the next 10 years.

Such diversity skews the age demographics since a large number of college students are counted within the 3-mile radius. We are not in a homogenous area. In fact, it is defined by its neighborhood pockets.

The age breakdown is approximately 35% in the 18-34 range (much higher than the national average) 22% in the 35 to 54 bracket (lower than the national average) and 26% in the 55 and up bracket.

The MissionInSite work shows the people within our area are predominately “spiritual in nature” with a high percentage (approximately 50%) that do not now and have not had a denominational or church affiliation. It is interesting to note that their spiritual understanding is a vague concept of God with very little understanding of Jesus.

The area is considerably ‘built out’ in housing and apartments with limited room for expansion. We are in a low population growth area estimated at 1.4%. Tracts of subsidized housing changes the portion of racial and ethnic percentages in the area. Essentially our racial and ethnic balance is not reflected geographically but in clusters within the area.

The pockets of high-density student housing and high-density minority poor in the area significantly impact the overall demographics. While they are opportunities for mission it is unlikely, they would feel attracted or comfortable joining a church with our current internal demographics.

In previous decades PHPC was a regional church with members from many areas throughout Onondaga County. This was influenced by PHPC being a planted church (by the Presbytery in 1955) started with members of many other churches. At present a large majority of our members live within a 5-mile radius of the church.

Our internal demographics do not reflect the balance of the demographic area. 75% of the members are over 55 years old. This leads to a very high percentage of empty nesters in the congregation. We are primarily Caucasian and almost exclusively middle and upper middle-class. We do reflect the immediate area around the church except we are likely a more mature group with less children in the household.

Based on the Holy Cow assessment tool we are not an Evangelism oriented congregation. We are here providing a wonderful traditional Presbyterian Worship experience with excellent theologically based preaching and wonderful music. This maybe in part due to the age of the congregation and the level of education and affluence.

We are open to all new people who wish to join us but are not sure how to bring them through the doors. We need to make better use of our ‘door’ on the web.

We are a progressive church in our social and religious views. We see our mission work as important to living our lives as Christians. We are strong spiritually and interested in preaching and education for children and adults to maintain this.

We have lost several of our elderly members in the past 3 years and that has had an emotional impact on the congregation especially as we have progressed through the pandemic with significant periods of not gathering in worship.

**Data Showing our 3-mile radius statistics (From PCUSA, MissionInSite, Holy Cow and NY records)**

**INCOME LEVELS**

Less than \$25,000:	6,328	(21.9%)	The poverty level for a family of 4 is \$27,750.00
\$25,000-\$44,999:	4,627	(16.0%)	
\$45,000-\$74,999:	6,267	(21.7%)	
\$75,000-\$124,999:	6,010	(20.8%)	
\$125,000 or more:	5,674	(19.6%)	
Total Households:	28,906		

**FAMILY TYPE**

Never Married:	33,800	(49.6%)	Likely significantly skewed by Syracuse University
Married (not separated):	22,898	(33.6%)	
Separated/Spouse Absent:	2,345	(3.4%)	
Divorced:	5,575	(8.2%)	
Widowed:	3,485	(5.1%)	
Total People 15 and Over:	68,103		

**AGE BREAKDOWN**

Ages 0 to 4:	3,871	(4.9%)	
5 to 9:	4,065	(5.1%)	
10 to 14:	3,623	(4.5%)	
15 to 17:	2,183	(2.7%)	
18 to 20:	11,988	(15.0%)	Significantly higher than the National average Likely significantly skewed by Syracuse University
21 to 24:	6,542	(8.2%)	
25 to 34:	9,827	(12.3%)	
35 to 44:	8,011	(10.1%)	Lower than the National average
45 to 54:	8,655	(10.9%)	Lower than the National average
55 to 64:	9,646	(12.1%)	
65 to 74:	5,898	(7.4%)	
75 and up:	5,353	(6.7%)	

**HOUSING TYPES**

Single Family Houses:	19,256	(58.5%)
Duplexes or Townhouses:	1,682	(5.1%)
2 to 4 Units at Address:	4,369	(13.3%)
5 to 9 Units at Address:	2,528	(7.7%)
10 or More Units at Address:	4,739	(14.4%)

Mobile Homes: 349 (1.1%)

### **Strengths and Challenges**

We spent one evening being really honest about who we are today. Our strengths will carry us through. God asks us to move forward from our strengths. God never asks us to do that which we cannot. However, we may feel that there are areas where we don't have the gifts and talents, but God may see it otherwise!

**Strengths:** A true hallmark of PHPC is the genuine caring that members have for each other, a caring that is joyously extended to newcomers. This is a loving community that expresses that love primarily in action, not word. This is evidenced in our strong racial reconciliation team that has been active for over 7 years. A foundational library to deal with racial reconciliation has been established. We continue with an ongoing program to look at the history of racism in this country. We find time to march and to make our voices heard and to seek significant ways to make a change. We are a Matthew 25 church.

PHPC has always had strong Christian Education programs. We support our youth in a variety of ways. We offer many adult forums and have run seminars featuring national speakers. Our congregation has been shaped by lively, thought-provoking discussions and sermons.

Our deacons are a wonderful example of the way we reach out both to our members and to the larger community. The deacons are the face of hospitality at PHPC, preparing refreshments for Sunday coffee hour, brunches, and dinners, assisting with communion, ushers, and all special events at the church. They are directly responsible for our participation in the New Jerusalem Food Bank. Through the Care, Prayer and Share ministry, each deacon is responsible for reaching out to specific members of the congregation, offering visitation and other types of support. During the pandemic, they were dedicated to reaching out to all members with telephone or email "check-ins."

Part of the current cohesiveness of PHPC can be attributed to the fact that many of its members have multigenerational ties to this congregation. The congregation is also fortunate to have members who are talented on several fronts and generous with their time. The COVID-initiated need for livestreaming and people stepping up to manage this is a case in point. In addition, a tradition of exemplary music has been central to PHPC's identity. We have an excellent physical facility that can be used for outreach. We are a very generous congregation, supporting a significant number of ministries. This is done through monetary donations and hands-on participation.

Here are some of the missions we support:

Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery General Mission

Member of Interfaith Works and ACTS (Alliance of Communities Transforming Syracuse)

Samaritan Center

Syracuse Memory Café

CNY Diaper Bank

Pebble Hill Community Garden  
Haiti Ministry & Mission in support of Paulette, Haiti  
Cayuga-Syracuse Presbytery Rent Subsidy Fund  
Presbyterian Disaster Assistance Hurricane Relief  
Haiti Student Scholarships  
PHPC Teachers Support  
Vera House  
Isaiah's Table  
New Jerusalem Food Pantry  
Eastern Farmworkers Association  
Rhama Health Clinic  
Food Bank of CNY  
Literacy CNY  
Interfaith Works Center for New Americans  
American Red Cross Blood Drive  
Church World Service CROP Walk  
Alzheimer's Association  
One Great Hour of Sharing  
Peacemaking Offering  
Christmas Joy Offering  
Christmas Stocking for Dr. Weeks Elementary School  
Ministers Discretionary Fund

**Challenges:** We are not as diverse as we would like to be. In many ways, PHPC has become "comfortable" in its ways and traditions. This extends throughout our church life. The congregation's numbers have decreased in recent years. There are not adequate avenues within PH for spiritual conversation; communication across committees is also relatively weak. We do not have a strong internet presence that proclaims our activity in the community.

Managing (and sharing) the workload of the church is a challenge in light of decreasing membership. We also need to continue to find new ways to engage the greater community. We can make more progress in this regard. The PHPC website needs upgrading as do other communication channels in order to communicate more accurately who we are and what we are about. Religious nurturance for all who hunger for God's presence in their lives must continue to be central to our mission.

We continue to support a variety of missions; however, our hands-on support has lessened as the congregation ages and decreases in number. It seems that the same people are the ones that have always been involved. This is a concern.

PHPC has not had a focus on developing its endowment and legacy gifts. We need to develop this area further.

We are involved in an ongoing lawsuit due to the actions of Rev. John Sisley. This is a concern, but we have a strong team and fine legal representation to address this issue.

We recognize that the illustrious career of our director of music, Bette Kahler, will be drawing to a close some point in the not-too-distant future. We need to be cognizant of how that will affect us.

We also looked at our **core Spiritual Formation** programs. This is a larger category than just Christian Education. We found these strengths:

PHPC Spiritual Formation Programs are deeply rooted in the Bible and are vital for the spiritual journey of PHPC members and visitors.

PHPC has the leadership (Elders/ Pastor) that are invested with development and delivery of meaningful Spiritual Formation programs.

Programs include –Adult Forums, Advent and Lenten Studies, Biblical Studies, an in-depth study of racism in America and others

Our Children’s Youth Sunday school teacher is providing valuable Christian Education studies to child(ren) that attend Sunday service, it is not a babysitting service.

We have a congregation that is open and willing to try new things, and the resources for the growth of Spiritual Formation.

### **Challenges:**

The community is unaware of the vast Spiritual Formation programs at PHPC.

We need to put a focus on Children’s Christian Education and Youth Programs, assess the needs and strengthen it.

We have had a hard time attracting young families. Many have been uncomfortable with bringing their unvaccinated children to church. Some have gotten out of the habit of coming.

We need to explore additional avenues to meet families where they are in the community.

### **Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church as a person metaphor**

We enjoyed a brainstorming activity in which we shared our vision of our church as seen with human characteristics. This helped us see more clearly our impressions of PHPC at the current time. Characteristics were identified in several categories, including physical appearance, gifts, strengths and weaknesses, handling stress, and relationship with God. A few of the descriptors contributed by the group were: kind face, elegant demeanor, stubbed toes, a corduroy sport coat with leather patches, respect for each other, suffering from goodbyes, grieving, relating to God faithfully, privately, consistently, and musically, and old in age but in many ways still young. One conclusion of this activity was, God loves this church.

### **The Congregational Conversations**

*Rationale.* After the Spiritual Discernment Council spent considerable time prayerfully reflecting on our church history, characteristics, strengths, and challenges, it was time to further seek God’s yearning for PHPC through the voices of the congregation. We considered

using a standardized assessment tool, as we had in the past, but decided that we would prefer to hear people's thoughts through personal conversations.

We developed three questions to elicit responses and chose to present the questions ahead of time. The questions were: 1. What do you value most about Pebble Hill? What activities or features or ways of life are the most important aspects of this church? 2. During the time of transition over the past two years, what insights or new ideas about Pebble Hill have you had? 3. What are your visions for the future of Pebble Hill? How would we make these happen?

*Method:* To accomplish the goal of hearing the people through conversation, we invited everyone in the congregation to attend one of two meetings to be held after the church services on Sundays. People were notified of the meetings through a letter and by announcements in the weekly newsletter and on Sundays in church. They were asked, but not required, to pre-register. They were also offered the options of responding to the questions using mail or email or attending a Zoom meeting. The three questions were sent in the original letter and were published in the church newsletter. For both Sundays, groups of congregants were set up with four to six members in each. Two members of the SDC were assigned to each group, one as facilitator and one as scribe. A 'grab and go' lunch was provided. Facilitators led the participants to discuss the questions provided and encouraged everyone to contribute.

*Results:* A significant number of our currently active members participated in this process, through one of the methods provided. People were positive about the experience. They were very willing to share thoughts and suggestions and enjoyed talking with each other. Members of the SDC met at a later date to analyze the data from all groups. Several themes emerged from the responses to each question.

*Themes:* Our most valued elements (from responses to Question 1)

Emphasis on quality sermons, God-centered worship, and excellent music program.

Educational opportunities for children and adults, including Bible study and the racial reconciliation study group.

Welcoming nature of the church, with feeling of family and loving care.

Open minds, accepting and welcoming diversity.

Social consciousness, social outreach, and mission activities.

Worship and activities which appeal to both "head and heart."

The nature of our congregation, people who are loyal, committed, and fun, as well as generous with time, talent, and financial support.

Our beautiful physical plant, grounds, and memorial garden.

Insights during transition and the pandemic (from responses to Question 2)

The vulnerability of our aging congregation, and the lack of children and families.

Recognizing our period of mourning, from deaths and other loss of members, and from the challenges of the pandemic.

Our openness to a female pastor.

Awareness of the value of technology and trying new approaches.

The need for better communication within the church and in the community.  
Realizing how much we value worshipping together.

Visions of God's yearning for our future. (Responses to Question 3)

We envision Pebble Hill Church surviving, thriving, and growing, while continuing to support excellent worship, music, and education.

Reaching out to serve the wider community, while continuing to serve our current members.

Promoting our church through publicity, marketing, and evangelism.

Expanding our use of technology and using our staff and volunteers more efficiently to spread the workload.

Reaching out with spirit-enriching activities other than Sunday worship.

Collaborating with other churches and organizations for joint projects and programs.

*Conclusion:* We believe the Congregational Conversations were an important step in our spiritual discernment process. It provided a positive experience for all those who participated and opened doors of communication that can be valuable as we go forward into the next chapter of our church history.

### **The Spiritual Discernment Process**

Throughout the entire 9-month spiritual discernment process it was emphasized in writing, discussion, and prayer that we were called to discern "what is God calling Pebble Hill to do?". Not what do we want but what does God want? How would God have us grow Spiritually? How would God have us change? Using the picture we created of who PHPC is, our strengths and weaknesses, our history, our gifts and our current congregational make up...what path or paths is God leading us towards.

At our council meeting in late April, we were given 30 minutes to be alone and contemplate the following questions: Along what path would Jesus take PHPC? If Jesus were setting the direction for our church, where would it go? At the conclusion of the Spiritual Discernment Council meeting, members gathered and were asked to share our thoughts.

### **Our understanding of God's Leading**

We feel we are being led to be committed to spiritual growth through deep, intellectual thought in service. Appreciating and learning about differences in order to educate, grow and develop understanding of needs within community and spread the message with gospel, music, faith, and thoughtful compassion for a diverse population.

- Reach out, expand, explore. Focus less on our needs and discern how we can meet the needs of others.
- God is leading us toward the pain of the world. We need to be more collaborative. Join forces with others outside of PHPC. We need to strengthen our ongoing relationship with the Congregation Beth Shalom-Chevra Shas and the Islamic Center.

- Focus on Biblical studies and how that interacts with our present lives. Engage in interfaith conversations.
- Use marketing and outreach tools (e.g., website/ Facebook) to connect with others and to communicate what we are about.

From other conversations in the Spiritual Discernment Council, we envisioned Sustainability as a call from God, offering guidance for PHPC's future.

1. How do we conserve our energies yet, at the same time, deepen and strengthen our relationships with one another and the community beyond?

2. How do we strengthen/deepen our understanding of the gospel? How do we take that understanding out into the world, showing respect for other points of view and become a relevant force, working for justice and peace?

3. How do we develop our consciousness as stewards of all that has been gifted to us? How do we thoughtfully care for our property? How do we promote care and concern for our planet Earth and lead the way toward more awareness with regard to our need and use of material goods?

From the thoughts shared, the next step in our discernment process was to identify three things that we believe God is leading Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church to pursue at this time. We recognize that there are many areas we could address, but Pastor Elizabeth suggested we only focus on three at this time.

### **What does this mean for Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church?**

#### **The focus for PHPC in the next six months.**

This report is a focus on the missions we believe that God is calling PHPC in the near future. The search for the pastor whom God is calling to PHPC will be directly affected by the work the Spiritual Discernment Council has done.

#### **Focus on Mission and Outreach**

Several Presbyterian churches around us haven't thrived or survived. Congregations that are significantly inwardly focused do not last. We come from a strong mission emphasis and this will assist in this work.

We should look into a project that requires collaboration with other faith-based organizations. We have not been as involved with Interfaith the past couple of years and this may be an area we can explore – i.e. refugee resettlement and sponsoring a family. We think this renewed focus can include:

Larger projects that are visible

Focus on ministries to serve our senior citizens.

Identity – get T-shirts etc. so that it is easy to identify us when we are doing projects in community.

Have our missions posted in the Atrium so people can see what we are doing.

Need to be more involved with Alliance of Community Transforming Syracuse (ACTS). Their projects include the ramifications of Rt. 81 restructuring, dealing with poverty in Syracuse and many others.

Update our congregational photos and put together an inhouse photo directory for the next pastor and newcomers.

### **Focus on Spiritual Formation (Christian Education and beyond)**

We recognize that Christian Education, mission, and worship are all parts of the Spiritual Formation of a follower of Jesus and a member of PHPC. Here are some areas we feel we should focus on:

Restart a Bible study early in the week that focuses on the readings for the next Sunday. Stronger childhood curriculum tied to lectionary > create the connections.

Work with other churches on youth programs such as vacation Bible School.

In-person Forums – Restart in Fall (worship to continue at 10am with Forums to start at 11:15).

Continue Zoom Forums, especially the Advent and Lent programs.

Move prayer requests to separate email early in the week that includes a prayer for the week.

Start up a spiritually themed book study.

### **Focus on Communications and structure**

Session should appoint an elder whose sole responsibility is outreach and technology. This person should coordinate any outside consultants needed to update our social media presence, oversee our live streaming, and find additional ways to make our work visible to the community. The elder can recruit others to work on these projects. Possible projects will include reintroducing Power Point on screen in Atrium and updating all church signage.

Look at the size and functions of our committees. We suggest that we merge Memorial Funds and Endowment into Finance. The session is now at 9 members instead of 12 and we need to move deacons towards the same model. Look at short term commitments instead of some of the long ones we have now. For example, we could ask for a 90-day commitment on a particular project. We could we ask someone to just take over one responsibility if they are not in a place where they can serve on a committee - such as finding ushers.

### **Conclusions**

Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church is a strong, vibrant community. It is smaller than it has been, but still maintains its vital spiritual cohesiveness and its call to follow our Lord, Jesus Christ in all ways. We remain hopeful but realistic that there are significant ways we need to change in order to continue to follow Christ's call to "Love and serve God and neighbor with open hearts, open hands and open minds."

June 18, 2022

The Spiritual Discernment Council

The Session of Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church

Donna Sognefest – Clerk of Session

Ron Cavanaugh

Steve Eidt

Kathy Fanella

Janine Bernard

Jean Soper

Doris Gorman

Nancy Stewart

Gary Quirk(excused)

Cindi Ferguson (excused)

Maureen Macero (excused)

David Hitchcock (not installed yet)

Karen Low (not installed yet)

## Additional Reflections from some of the members of the Spiritual Discernment Council

### *Don Pair's reflection*

Number one would focus on the needs of others especially the older generation. Memory Cafe has been an eye opener for many. Within the church, neighborhood, nursing homes, clubs. I can assure you that many would greatly appreciate a phone call, a post card or at least some notice of their existence. It was my experience that on average 50% of nursing home residents have no visitor. Not sure what facilities such as Nottingham experience. Maybe we could adopt a facility for cards and/or phone-calls. You do not have to physically visit. I think we could develop a list of at least one hundred. Cost - some of your time and a little postage. Next more opportunity for becoming closer to the Bible. First many of us would need to find our Bible. Be confident, it is in some drawer or on a bookshelf. We certainly have an abundance of explainers. Some I even understand. Just joking. we are blessed to have such a stable of teachers. I think God would approve. Next is more structural. I think he might approve of monthly or quarterly meetings of all committee chairs. We are blessed with talented people. Let them become more familiar with all of the organization. Might be of help to Session. That is about all for now. I could go on for much more but I want to leave all with a true story. I had the opportunity to work a week with a great salesperson. At the end of the week, I asked how I had done. He paused and said well you obviously spent a lot of time studying the product. That is good as it is a complicated product. Just one problem - you never asked for an order. Have you asked anyone to visit on Sunday at Pebble Hill? I cannot resist passing this along. From the religion op-ed section. Story about a group of Jews who gathered together to Pray for rain during a drought. As they prayed, one child innocently looked up at everyone and asked "How come no one brought an umbrella?"

### *Steve Eidt's reflections*

We see ourselves serving God by continuing our service to the poor and disadvantaged of all peoples and ages.

We see ourselves growing in size through Christ's command to go out and evangelize in the world. We don't know how to put this into practice at this time, but we are looking at various alternatives. We recognize our limitations through our current size and age structure.

We have shown our ability and keen interest in serving the elderly community in our area. We see our preaching style as theologically informative and spiritually uplifting.

We are a community of faith that is learning, practicing, and committed to being a beacon for social justice in our community. Most of our work in this arena has been internally learning and understanding. We believe that God wants us to reach out and share our knowledge and understanding and be an active witness in the wider community for justice, inclusion and acceptance.

### *Kathy Fanella's reflections*

Mission: We as an aging church population should look for "short term" projects that can be accomplished without too much traveling or making large commitments of time, such as, clothing drives, or collecting personal hygiene products, or making prayer shawls, or sending cards to "pen pals" in nursing homes or hospitalized veterans .Examples I have seen recently

include a news item about an elementary school that collected hundreds of boxes of cereal to donate, then created a domino chain of the boxes that went through the whole building, and the kids lined the corridors to watch the boxes fall down. While visiting a church near my home recently, I saw a big poster, near their entrance, which lists all the mission projects they are currently involved in, and a person to contact if interested in participating. Another idea which Rev Elizabeth mentioned is a “diaper day” to benefit the diaper bank. I think our congregation has the energy for small but effective projects like this. We can also collaborate with other agencies and churches who are already doing things we could join. No need to re-invent the wheel.

Activities Beyond Worship: Developing activities other than worship which can enhance people’s spiritual lives, such as themed discussion groups, book or Bible study, movie watching and discussion, musical or social events for our congregation or open to the community.

**ABOVE ALL, TRUST IN THE SLOW WORK OF GOD**

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.  
We are quite naturally impatient in everything to  
reach the end without delay.  
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.  
We are impatient of being on the way to  
something unknown, something new.  
Yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by  
passing through some stages of instability and  
that may take a very long time.

And, so, I think it is with you.  
Your ideas mature gradually. Let them grow.  
Let them shape themselves without undue haste.  
Do not try to force them on as though you could  
be today what time - that is to say, grace – and  
circumstances acting on your own good will,  
will  
make you tomorrow.  
Only God could say what this new Spirit  
gradually forming in you will be.

Give our Lord the benefit of believing that his  
hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of  
feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.  
Above all, trust in the slow work of God,  
our loving vine-dresser. Amen.