

**First Presbyterian Church of Salem**  
**88 Market Street, Salem, New Jersey 08079**  
**(856) 935-2148 • [fpcs.pnc@fpcsnj.com](mailto:fpcs.pnc@fpcsnj.com)**

## **FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF SALEM NEW JERSEY**

### **MISSION STUDY TEAM REPORT**

#### **REVISED FALL OF 2016**

Welcome to the First Presbyterian Church of Salem, a conservative, evangelical, orthodox congregation in the southern region of New Jersey. This document includes basic demographical and economic data compiled by Rutgers University, the results of the congregational survey, and our vision.

We are a small congregation of approximately one hundred members serving a diverse and struggling urban center in the most rural county in the State of New Jersey. We have been blessed with an endowment which provides our congregation with the means to provide not only for our congregation, but also provides our congregation with the means to reach out to the greater community as well. We strongly believe and follow the parable of the Faithful Servant, Luke 12:24 *"To whom much was given, of him much will be required."* Our vision has never been only about us, nor is it about building a big Church; it is about enlarging the ministry of the kingdom in the City of Salem, which is in desperate need.

At our core we believe in Christ-centered ministry. We believe that Jesus of Nazareth is the Word of God made flesh (John 1:14). We bear this belief out in the importance we place in the preached Word. We also hold the teaching of the Bible to be necessary for a growing relationship with God in Christ; for the Bible testifies of the eternal life that those who are in Jesus have (John 5:39). Jesus Christ is front and center in our ministry (Colossians 1:17-18).

Salem City, where our church is located, was founded in 1675 and is an urban center which has served as the County seat of Salem County for two hundred years. Salem was once a major trading port and manufacturing center on the Delaware River just thirty- five miles south of Philadelphia. Our boom time seems to have waned in the 1980's. We lost manufacturing jobs to Mexico and southern states. The port now only sees one or two ships a week, and our economy has taken a tremendous set back. Today our population is about 5,000; clearly half of what it was just fifty years ago.

During the 1950's, 60's and 70's the Church and the City both saw large growth. The Church congregation numbered just over 300 believers, which was due in part to a series of three pastors who brought long-term integrity to the Pastoral office. However since then we have had Pastors that have served with little integrity, which has caused our membership to drop dramatically. The last pastor who served us for nine years was charged and convicted of "sexual assault of a child". He is now serving time in a State facility.

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Needless to say, during our interim time, there has been much need for healing in our congregation. Our previous Pastor, though, at times, austere and autocratic, had been a faithful Pastor for nine years, leading the congregation with solid biblical preaching and teaching. It was shocking for many to be in a bible study one evening and to be informed the next day, with no warning, that he had resigned for mysterious reasons. Within weeks, our new interim pastor arrived and during his first week with us, it was suddenly announced on television and in the newspapers that our pastor had been arrested.

One source of healing presented itself immediately. Our Church was scheduled to host the community Thanksgiving service. The local ministerium encouraged member churches to be present to support, encourage and pray for First Presbyterian Church as we worshipped and gave thanks together. Our new interim was asked to preach and we sensed that we were not in this alone.

We needed healing in many ways. First, there was fear, fear that more children might be involved, fear that false accusations would be made and fear that we may not be able to handle all the pressures that accompany a high profile trial. We also needed to be healed of our anger and resentment and to increasingly receive God's grace so that we might be instruments of grace, particularly in developing forgiving spirits. This was not easy, but God has been good and, as always, his grace continues to abound over our sin. Practically, we had to spend thousands of dollars in legal fees to make sure we were prepared for any future challenges and to evaluate our practices in ministry, making sure of background checks, appropriate leadership ratios and even changes to our building, most notably altering many of our doors with see through windows.

As in all healing, those who are in the process, even as they begin to heal, are still susceptible. Wounds can easily be opened. Our congregation is no exception, although there is a great comfort and challenge in long term relationships within a small church family. Our interim pastor has provided, through his leadership, an opportunity for wounds to heal, for grace to prevail through the teaching of the word of God and through the caring relationships, both within the congregation and in the healthy connection with other believers in our community. It is crucial that our new pastor continues this crucial work of ministry.

Presbyterians first began worshipping in Salem City around the end of the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. We first worshiped with the local Episcopalian congregation but divided over the 17<sup>th</sup> Article of the Church of England, (Predestination) building our first Church in 1821, and expanding to our current home in 1856. Our building is on the local, state, and federal registry of historic places. Our building is a landmark in South Jersey with its soaring steeple reaching 162 feet into the sky. Lighted at night it is a beacon to mariners in the Delaware Bay. Salem is an historic city, with many structures in Salem - predating the founding of our nation. We have a beautiful main street with the oldest operating courthouse in New Jersey. Salem is surrounded by bucolic meadow and marshes and most of the County economy is driven by agriculture. Salem was originally a marketing town and later became a manufacturing center.

Salem, as many struggling communities, faces high unemployment, families that are broken with drug and alcohol abuse, a high crime rate, and crumbling neighborhoods. The demographic section will

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provide a better picture of where we are. However, to point out a couple of indicators that really emphasizes our point. The median income average for the state is \$69,667 vs. Salem City at \$27,636. The unemployment average for the state is 8.2%, for the City 20.1%. And finally the state average poverty rate is 10.8% and the City is 33.1%. (These figures were compiled in 2013. Matters have only worsened since that time).

However, what Salem does have is a strong evangelical base of many ecumenical churches that work together to improve the quality of life for our neighbors. **We pray a lot here in Salem.** Our Church or the “Church with the Steeple” as it is commonly known, has developed and taken a leadership position in supporting our fellow churches and developing a youth program to benefit the children of Salem. We founded and fund the Light House Ministries, a bold initiative that provides many programs including tutoring, mentoring, bible studies and youth activities to our members but more importantly the youth of our community. Some of these activities include mission trips to Appalachia, local field trips, and community work projects. We have helped countless children see beyond the limits of Salem and realize that through Jesus Christ there is a better way.

A number of years ago the Light House Youth program initiated a community garden, which has evolved into the Olive Street Garden Project. This program provides our City youth an opportunity to participate in agricultural activities, and a great chance to share the Gospel as we all get our hands dirty in the soil. We have located the garden in one of the roughest neighborhoods in the City. We are currently under contract with the City to purchase four vacant lots and a separate deal to purchase an adjacent historic but dilapidated building. One of our members has committed significant funds to develop the lots and building into a learning and resource center.

The vision of our congregation is that we will center our work here in the City using the Garden project as our springboard. We will strengthen our outreach by forming partnerships with local congregations, our public and charter schools, and the community at large. In the future we would like to partner and sponsor a Young Life ministry here.

Another program of importance to the congregation is our Music Ministry. We have a highly talented music director whose encourages both volunteers and professionals to share their gifts with the congregation. The ministry holds special concerts and programs in addition to participating in the Sunday worship. We also encourage young students to provide vocal and instrumental music during the Sunday services to give them an opportunity to perform in a safe environment.

We also want to emphasize our churches leadership role in the community. We annually hold special community services in our Church; we sponsor ministerium scholarships to graduating Salem seniors, and assist other churches with funds for some of their outreach programs, and occasionally their utility bills.

In preparing the survey our committee determined to focus on three main issues: 1) basic demographics including age brackets, years of membership, attendance, etc. 2) what respondents liked or found challenging in attending the Church, and 3) what they were looking for in a new Pastor who will share our vision.

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Although important to get a feel of our congregation we will not go into discussion here concerning the demographics, although the information is included for everyone's review. First let us highlight what members find most positive about our Church, our leadership and our mission. A large majority of our respondents state the Church is warm and personal, alive and compelling, with an active and concerned interest in our surrounding community. They also believe the Church is strongly interested in the needs of youth (although one member remarked "sometimes overly so..."). The respondents also believe that the congregation is very dedicated in their commitment to Christ, and knowledgeable of the Bible and our reformed Faith. At any given worship service the members usually feel a sense of God's presence, Inspiration, Joy, and a sense of fulfillment when they leave the service. And oh yes, they prefer traditional hymns and praise music.

When asked What do you like most about our Church, some of the comments included: the beautiful sanctuary, the caring and loving members, traditional worship and commitment to the community, our stance on the essential Faith, ties to tradition, and our biblical foundation. Recurring themes were the sense of family and our devotion to helping others, but most importantly our commitment to Christ. Respondents also ranked the Mission of the Church very strongly in the following categories: Sound Christ centered doctrine, Faithfulness to Biblical Authority, communal Prayer, adult/children's education, support of local mission organizations, and our outreach to the community and youth activities.

Respondents also shared the challenges in our Church. The negatives generally fall into two categories, 1) the Denomination, and 2) basic housekeeping of programs. The most negative comments were reserved for the PCUSA including the "denominations liberalism", and "the new doctrine that the PCUSA is mandating is not Biblical" which are two comments that represent the general feeling of the congregation. Category number two includes comments such as "we need more fellowship events", a "stronger curriculum for Sunday school", and representative comments include changing the time of the Sunday service, more youth activities, less youth activities, uplifting hymns, etc. One item mentioned a number of times is the lack of Evangelism in its traditional definition.

Overall the respondents to this survey were excited about our local Church, are happy with the direction that it is taking, and although naturally everything can get better, are generally satisfied with the focus and style of the Church. The recurring theme of concern is the actions of the denomination and what consequences will befall the greater Church. We find that our local church almost always lands on the conservative side of these debates. Although conservative, we are tolerant of others viewpoints, however the words printed on the cover of every Sunday bulletin truly sums up our beliefs:

***Scripture Alone***

***Grace Alone***

***Faith Alone***

***Christ Alone***

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*All to the Glory of God*

The respondents to this survey clearly made the beliefs known as to the type of Pastor that they are looking for. The strong majority of respondents marked planning and leading worship and preparing and preaching sermons as their highest priority. A little further down the list were developing and supporting programs for children and youth, visiting the sick, and shut-ins, and participating in community activities, issues and problems. The other end of the scale representing less importance is administrative management of financial resources, participating in denominational activities and supporting the world mission of the Church. **The respondents are asking for a Pastor with strong preaching skills, leading a well-organized traditional worship service and willing to be active in the community.**

The strongest category that we will discuss here is our vision, and the type of person we need to be our new Pastor. In the survey respondents are looking for a Pastor who is outgoing and socially engaging. Ranking very closely to this is one who welcomes new approaches and ideas and is clearly rooted in biblical teachings. Also notably mentioned is a comforting personality. We look for a Pastor that will nurture the congregation and conduct themselves as a spiritual leader, a trusted friend, approachable, and inspired by the love of the Holy Spirit, a pastor that embraces our vision and restores the congregation's faith in the office of the Pastor.

Our vision encompasses centering all of our resources within the City of Salem. Our mission outreach and our vision are the same, the City around us. Using the Garden as our impetus we will bring the Gospel of Jesus to the kingdom of Salem. We need an inspired leader that willingly adopts our vision, is more interested in building the faith in the community than building the attendance on Sunday. We pray for a leader with integrity, conservative faith but liberal in the best sense growing out of our theology. The healing of ourselves begins with the restoration of our integrity.

In conclusion, although our Church has been here for almost two hundred years, we feel that we are still vital and at the beginning of the Lord's work here in Salem. Financially strong, the congregation is in a unique position to encourage and work beside our neighbors in bringing the love of Jesus Christ to those less fortunate. Our world mission of the Salem Church is clearly directed at the two square miles that is our home.

We are looking for a Pastor that will forget that we are small, and understand that the work needed here is large. This isn't a little country church surrounded by open fields; it is in the center of a struggling community. We could have taken our resources and built a fortress, but decided instead to open our gates and to follow the Lord in making a difference. Surely we need a strong Pastor that can preach the very word of the Lord, to carry our traditional views, but to also roll up their sleeves and become an inspirational leader within the City of Salem. We are looking for that leader to join us and to lead us as we continue to toil in our little patch of the earth.

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*We believe God is able to do all things which are consistent with His holy nature and will. He has unlimited power over nature, human life, and the course of history. His will cannot be ultimately frustrated. Consequently, we believe there is no area of human relationship, endeavor, or culture that is outside God's domain.*

In His Name,

Kim Owens, Earl Gage-Co-chair

Reid Willis

Sharan Eastlack

Elizabeth Davenport