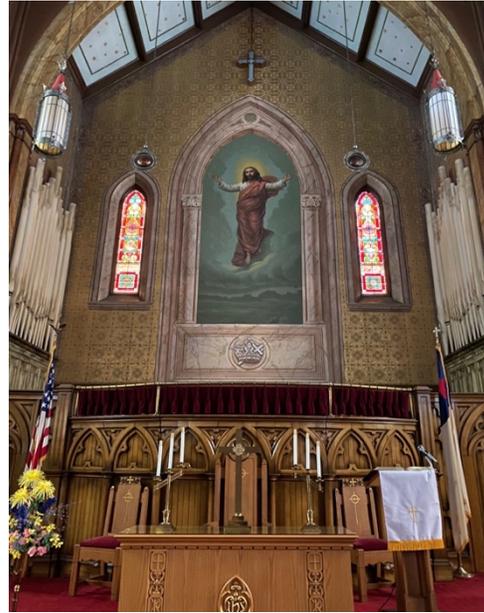


Hickory Street United Presbyterian Church

A faith filled community in the heart of South Side Scranton; striving to equip God's people for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ.



Mission Study Report

A Brief History:

Matthew 18:20: *“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”*

Hickory Street Presbyterian Church was organized on January 28, 1856, as the German Presbyterian Church. In 1931 the name was changed to Hickory Street Presbyterian Church, and in the early 1960's it was given a third name: Hickory Street United Presbyterian Church. The last sermon preached in German was delivered by the Reverend Dr. Theodore Hahn. Hickory Street Presbyterian Church owns 3 buildings, a cemetery, and a small picnic area. The current church building was built in 1887. The manse next to the church was built in 1895 and purchased with money earned by the Ladies Aid Society. The Parish House was built in 1902 and is now known as the William H. Maurer Memorial Center, in honor of our tenth pastor. In 1869, the Church purchased a valuable piece of property along Pittston Avenue which was set aside and dedicated as a burial place for the members of the church. The Pittston Avenue Cemetery continues to be maintained by staff from Hickory Street Presbyterian Church. In February 2016 we were gifted land in Elmhurst Township that includes a pavilion, outdoor kitchen, and barbeque pit. It is used seasonally by several of our organizations, especially our scout troops for outdoor activities and overnight camping.

Twelve men have served as Pastors, four of whom (Nordt, Hahn, Maurer, and Collins) served for a combined 104 years. It is a church of long pastorates, the longest being held by the Reverend Tom Collins, who was our minister for 32 years.

In 1994, the Petersburg Presbyterian Church merged with Hickory Street United Presbyterian Church. Many of the Petersburg Presbyterian Church members came to Hickory Street Presbyterian Church through this merger. In the early years of both churches, Hickory Street and Petersburg churches shared a pastor, the Reverend Wilhelm C. Wunderlich. Others were attracted to our church family due to our vibrant ministry to children and youth, and through our worship experience. Recently, several dedicated and hard-working servants from other local churches, which have had to close their doors, also joined our membership and added more levels to our discipleship.

Fifteen Elders join our Pastor on Session, and twelve Deacons minister to persons within and outside our congregation. Our staff includes a Transitional Pastor (FT), an Office Assistant (PT), a Minister of Music (PT) and a Custodian (PT).

Many factors from the past have influenced HSPC and enabled us to reach our present place. Numerous pastors have guided us, often with very different types of leadership. Some took a stronger role while others encouraged the session and membership to take a more active part in decision making. We have had long pastorates, one of which ended with the pastor dying in the pulpit, and shorter interim pastors while we worked diligently to find new leadership.

Our most recent pastorates have influenced us in different ways. Following a very long pastorate came a pastor whose ministry ended sadly, without full congregational support. Through internal discussion and prayer, along with suggestions and assistance from Presbytery, the congregation pulled together to get past this difficult time. We learned to delegate responsibilities and not rely so much on a full-time pastor for handling day-to-day issues. Sadly, there was not a clear understanding of the depth and seriousness of the problems that were occurring at that time. Presbytery helped us to educate the congregation on the topics of mental health and healthy boundaries as we learned to respect the balance of privacy for the pastor and a need to know by the congregation. Our hope is that in our selection of a new pastor we will be able to narrow the gap between these two obstacles.

Currently, a transitional pastor has brought messages of hope and joy in Christ's work. The church is not ours but rather Christ's. We are slowly making progress in Being the Church by working together. We have become more of a servanthood rather than preservers of the same old ways. We have come to understand the challenging nature of being a pastor and discovered much of the work can be and should be taken upon our shoulders as leaders and members serving God. We have learned that risks are good things and to maintain the freshness of the gospel to a new society with new needs and challenges not only serves God but brings us together as a people, as disciples. Our church desires to work sincerely and faithfully to serve God and his children. Due to those different pastorates, we have learned to be not defensive and self-serving or preserving. We have come to see that we are God's beloved children, serving

and praising the one who calls us, and we want our energy, our efforts, dedicated to the Spirit to spill out into the community and world around us. Our collective faith is a bag of individual faith expression, appreciated and accepted by each of us and our Lord. We love each other but most importantly we love our creator who calls us to serve and celebrate in the love.

It was also our extreme good fortune to have, for many years, an excellent Director of Christian Education who initiated multiple programs for HSPC youth and for youth throughout the local community. In addition to Sunday classes, he led after school programs, VBS, summer trips to youth events and contributed support and advice when requested.



The Present:

A simple definition of present would be "existing or occurring now." At HSPC, now is the time to spread our ministry and mission. The present is the time to utilize, to the fullest extent, the gifts God has shared with us. We can see the need around us and enact changes to lessen it.

Matthew 25:35-40: *"For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was sick, and you looked after me, I was in prison, and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in or needing clothing and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."*

Our membership numbers are not increasing, but dedication, enthusiasm, compassion, and generosity allow us to provide programs to help the less fortunate. Our facilities enable us to not only worship and gather as a congregation but also make it possible to share the space with others. Our sanctuary is one of the most beautiful in the city. The manse, spacious and comfortable, is currently being used for both adult and youth education classes. The large memorial center holds numerous events such as dinners, meetings, scouting activities, and personal gatherings if requested. All are well-used and inviting spaces.

Our largest outreach endeavor has been to help address food insecurity in the community. Currently, we offer free meals, along with non-perishable food items, to our friends and neighbors, twice each month. This is on an eat-in or take-out basis. We learned that those who eat-in come for the food and for the companionship and fellowship. Many come early to have coffee and converse with others attending. Some must use public transportation to get to these meals, and rarely miss the opportunity to be there. On average, we provide about 160 meals at each event, and this number has grown by leaps and bounds since the program's inception. Non-perishables, from our food pantry, are available upon request at any time.

We are fortunate to be involved in mission partnerships with the Scranton Korean Church, First Presbyterian Church of Clarks Summit, and Scouts of America Troops 16 and 1016 who host and provide several meals throughout the year. Members of our congregation and our Deacons also furnish meals for this program. We are blessed to be able to use this program to connect with other congregations and allow them to assist us with this endeavor. We would like to continue in our efforts to reach out to other churches through our contacts with personal friendships and organizations such as the Safety Net Board to encourage others to participate.

Every Thanksgiving we distribute approximately 50 bags of groceries to feed a family of four. Also included is a gift card for a local grocery store. These cards are donated by Rabiaga Gorgol VFW post 3451, Scout Troops 16 and 1016, and Mike Griffin, State Farm Insurance Agency.

In addition to food-related ministry, HSPC participates in numerous other outreach programs. In the spring we collect essential personal items for a local mission. In August we have backpack, school supplies, and book giveaways for students in the community. Each year the response to this has grown. In October, a Halloween costume, candy, and book event is hosted for neighborhood children. Santa's Workshop, where children can choose gifts for family or friends, at no cost, is held in December. Children can also visit and get a photo with Santa. Also, in December there is the "Stars of Wonder" program where we participate with the Day Nursery of Scranton and give gifts to children of low-income families.

HSPC contributes to Denominational Mission, Breadbasket of NEPA, Safety Net administration and client use, Keystone Rescue Mission, St. Francis of Assisi Kitchen, and Exodus Ministries. We also give to the PCUSA four special offerings: One Great Hour of Sharing, Pentecost, Peace and Global Witness, and Christmas Joy.

We are very fortunate for the generous \$5.5 million in endowments that sustains both our work and our property. These funds have allowed us to be very generous in our benevolence and increase our outreach over the past few years. We depend on returns from our investments to meet our budget due to decreasing member contributions. We are also dealing with some property and maintenance concerns and depend on these funds to address safety and upkeep of our numerous aging properties. Session is currently working with The Presbyterian Foundation to determine what decisions we can make to increase the longevity of our endowments and strengthen our influence in our community.

Within our church, to fulfill our spiritual needs, numerous activities bring and keep us together. Worship and music each week, in person or virtual, lays the foundation. Communion is offered on the first Sunday of each month and at other specific times throughout the year. At-home Communion is also provided upon request. Adult Bible Study, led by the pastor, is held each week. BASH (Bible and study hour) for our youth is led by dedicated teachers aspiring to find new and innovative ways to share God's message. Our faithful choir shares its beautiful music with us during our services. All worship services are live-streamed and available to watch on YouTube at any time.

Adult Fellowship meets each month and enjoys food and fellowship. This group has a rummage sale in June, an apple pie sale in October, and a pork and sauerkraut dinner in November. At the end of each year, money from this organization is contributed to local organizations including the Catherine McAuley Center, Meals on Wheels, NEPA Youth Shelter, Women's Resource Center, and the Gino Merli Veteran's Center.

To enhance fellowship within the congregation we have Coffee and Conversation once a month following Worship, family bowling events in the spring, trips to a professional hockey and baseball game, and a Christmas Fest.

Hickory Street Presbyterian Church is actively working to understand and carry out the words in Matthew 25. We hope that, as God has asked us, we are feeding the least of our brothers and sisters. That said, our congregational survey expresses our membership's concerns.

Survey Summary:

20% of our members completed a survey of questions pertaining to the preferences of our congregation. Half of those who responded are actively involved as deacons or elders or currently serving on some kind of committee. There was a very broad age range of those who responded, from 16 years to 90 years. 97% of responses were from people who have been members for 5 years or more.

50% of those surveyed spend an average of 1-5 hours each month participating in church activities. Those who stated that their participation has decreased in recent years said that it was due to the Covid Pandemic. 62% watch or have watched our worship services online when they cannot attend in-person. 96% of those who responded live within 20 minutes of the church.

73% stated that their spiritual needs are being met by this congregation. 30% prefer the more traditional style of worship and 10% would like to see more contemporary music and worship. 82% prefer topical preaching using several Scriptures of the Bible to address an issue or discuss a topic, 67% of those surveyed feel that a minister should have the ability to deliver sermons that capture and keep the congregation's attention and to deliver sermons that relate to the congregation's current lives. 66% feel that a minister should have the ability to communicate with Session and employees and be a person who takes initiative. 66% believe that the most important roles in pastoral care are visiting patients in the hospital and providing comfort to

families during bereavement. 81% would like to have a pastor that shares the decision-making with group members by promoting the interests of the group members.

Many people responded that the strengths of our church include mission and community outreach. Comments included, "strong fellowship, sense of dedication, and helping those in need." Weaknesses included, "resistance to change, lack of involvement, lack of attendance, increasing age of members, and lack of activities for youth."



The Future:

Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are **all one** in Christ Jesus."

Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you."

Hickory Street sees that the **kingdom of God has come**, and that **the kingdom is also yet to come**. We must move forward, never stagnant or settled. We hope to find a pastor ready to lead us with that understanding. As the Holy Spirit is dynamic, we as seekers must also be. And there is an embracing attitude within us not to be afraid of tomorrow, but rather live with hope and excitement for where we are going. The Holy Spirit not only opens our eyes to new challenges but creates in us an openness for what may come. We are not anchored to a sinking ship. There is faith that we have a tomorrow and a willingness to change. There is not only an acceptance of what will come, but an acceptance and welcome of who may come. Through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Hickory Street knows there is an enduring tomorrow where we are all one in Him, a promised inheritance.

Our membership gives of its time, energy, support, and finances. Our vision for tomorrow is exciting. We want to build greater mission opportunities beyond our campus with hands-on activities such as mission projects with building, painting, serving meals, leading Bible studies, and educational ministries in areas that need our help and love.

To embrace that or any future, we must honestly answer several questions and we need a willing pastor to help us recognize those questions and answers. What do we hope to become? How will we achieve our vision? We are a congregation that realizes who we were cannot be who we are nor who we will become. Our people understand that we must be flexible enough to recognize a changing sense of Identity.

We don't look like we did 100 or even 20 years ago. Those times are of the past. Yet, we believe our oneness with brothers and sisters in Christ will be our banner to love, help, and serve all those within our membership, around the corner, or in places beyond our community in need...whatever that need may be.

As we look to the future, our session has committed itself to the question of regeneration. We have drawn into a covenant with Presbyterian Foundation to research and share our thoughts for what we can become with the help of the Holy Spirit to guide us. Through discussion and meditation, we are studying ourselves, seeking to find the unique qualities of what we are to become.

The Alban Institute suggests, "Learn your congregation's stage of life and how it can affect issues of administration, program, energy, and inclusion. What is our method for understanding church dynamics and the 'pitfalls and possibilities' for future stages of congregational life." In other words, what do we realistically have in human resources and how do we reenergize those on the fringe of membership who have a history with the church but for some reason have stepped back?

In addition to mission projects and work beyond our doors into the community, we must continue to review and improve the quality of Christian education and the spiritual nurture of members (children, youth, and adults) with aggression.

Mission Insite notes regarding the future of the community where we exist are as follows: Very little population change is expected over the next 10 years. Any increase expected is regarding Asian and Latino or Hispanic families. An increase in single parent families and a significant decrease in household income is also expected. The greatest personal health and life concerns are regarding Covid. This is still, in 2024, the number one reason why people reported they do not attend religious services; number two is demands of raising children, and the greatest complaint about the Church is that it is too focused on money while the greatest community concern is illegal immigration. Finally, the greatest financial concern for our area is unemployment.

Lastly, in response to both studies as we look to the future, our congregation needs to understand that we are an inner-city church. Any plan or vision we might have for the future must revolve around that identity. Doing things the way we have always done them will not work any longer. How can we let our community know we truly care about all of its members because our God has created us to do so? We need someone to help guide us not only regarding our presence but into relationship with our community. We want to extend the invitation to attend programs we develop and to be involved in or with events and programs of our diverse community. We continue to discuss plans to volunteer more with local community organizations such as St. Francis Soup Kitchen and the United Neighborhood Centers of Northeast PA, with their neighborhood clean ups and possibly serving hoagies at their South Side Farmers market. Afterall, our overall purpose as a church is not to make new members but rather to share in the wide open and inclusive love of Jesus Christ to everyone. And we need to learn to celebrate the diverse cultures and traditions of all God's children. We want to share energy and any asset we can so that we all learn to appreciate each other, integrate with one another, and break down the barriers that separate us all. In other words, we need to redefine ourselves from something exclusive to something inclusive. And within those goals, we can't settle into a comfort stage, saying that we have done all we can when we haven't really. We need to try earnestly before we dismiss any attempts to let our neighbors know that we are not something set apart for their joys and struggles. We need to invite and create with these hopes in mind so that all may know that we are Christians by our love. God loves the world, not simply Presbyterians.

Romans 12:1-2, 11-13: *"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will.*

¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality."

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