

Mission Study Report October 2022

The East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church Mission Study committee was formed in late March, 2022, for the purpose of looking at the church's past, and more importantly, its future. Along with interim pastor Larry Jones, there were four members in the group – two men, two women, one young person, and three seniors. This represents the congregation accurately, as the congregation is an aging body with very few young members. The four worked well together. Andrew Calderwood was a great asset, having grown up in the church but also living away for a few years. Valerie Morrison was the longest-standing member (since 1975), with Elsie Hurt and Todd Hardie having come into the church within the past 15 years. Our discussions were open and honest, with Pastor Larry at first needing to caution us about too much hand-wringing at times! It certainly is more gratifying to talk about the church's past than its seemingly uncertain future.

The History

The first East Craftsbury church congregation was formed in 1816 at the home of Robert Trumbull which was near the present location of the church. It was a Reformed Presbyterian (Covenanter) church and grew over the next 40 years as new families from Scotland arrived in the area. During the 1830s, a wood frame building was erected. In 1905 the congregation joined the United Presbyterian Church. A new building was needed and constructed in 1907, using the design of architect Frank Lyman Austin of Burlington. Excellent acoustics were desired and achieved! The building has always been known for its wonderful acoustics. The basic structure has been well cared for and remains much the same. Over the years the kitchen has been modernized, a second bathroom added, the narrow stairway to the basement replaced, and a lift installed.

The church has a long commitment to mission: national, international, and local. We continue to support PCUSA international mission and significant ministry to the local assisted living center across from the church, in addition to support of the local food shelf. In the last two years, before the pandemic, the church developed and supported a “backpack” program for the local secondary school, providing food items to four students the school identified as not having sufficient food over the weekends. (This stopped when the school became remote and the school provided food for the students.) The church also coordinated a successful effort for Presbyterian Disaster Relief, helping victims of severe flooding in the south.

The Fellowship Hall and kitchen downstairs, plus the upstairs office and classroom, everything with the exception of the sanctuary, is currently being loaned out to a licensed Daycare (the Saplings) and used 5 days per week, 50 weeks per year. The church has also allowed them to put a temporary building behind the church to house the toddler program and allow them to serve more families. They have the use of our outdoor space for play, gardening, and exploring.

The People

A few in the congregation are descendants of the original Scottish immigrant families. If you peeked into a worship service during the '70s and '80s, you would have seen 50 to 60 people, complete families, and lots of children. Predominately farm families, they were faithful weekly attendees. There was a thriving Sunday School for all ages, including adult classes, held in the hour before worship. In the summer there was a two-week Bible School. At this time, many members of the congregation were related.

By the early 2000s there were fewer dairy farmers in the congregation, as their farms had either diversified, or been absorbed into the remaining larger dairy farms that depend increasingly on laborers for whom English is a second language. The children of those families were grown. Many of them had left the area, and some who stayed discontinued a relationship with the church. For a few years, membership decline was slowed because a number of professional retired couples came to the area and joined the congregation. At one time there were five retired pastors involved with the congregation! Attendance was around 50-55 at this time, but always slightly higher in the summer because of regular summer visitors. Currently the number at Sunday worship usually ranges between 20 and 30, with, on average, 5-10, viewing on line.

The Demographics

According to MissionInsite, a community analysis tool made possible by the Presbytery of Northern New England, Craftsbury is a stable area in terms of occupation and population but across the last ten years has been aging. The forecast for the next ten years is that the area will remain stable but continue to age. Following the pandemic, as concerns about climate-change and the possibilities for remote-work have increased, there has been a substantial increase in the number of people making Vermont their primary residence. While improving the demographics of the area and helping the local economy and tax base, this has led to greatly increased property values and rents, and a general shortage of housing.

ECPC's membership reflects the community in terms of age and occupation. Most of the members at ECPC have college degrees. There is somewhat of a divide in town between long-time residents of the community and newer folks, in terms of education, background, income levels, and perspective. We seek to strive to maintain our Presbyterian heritage and intellectual depth while making our outreach accessible to people who come from varied backgrounds and cultures.

The First Work

As a group, the committee began with much discussion and sharing of observations. We decided to interview as many people as possible about the church and how they viewed it. The interviewees were both current worshipers and those on the fringes and even those who no longer make any kind of connection to the church. We prepared questions such as "What brought you here?" and "What would you like to see for the church's future?" Universal concern for the church's future was expressed by those still connected to the church, as well as the frustration of not knowing what

to do to change the course it is on. Nothing came out of the interviews to indicate the church is doing anything “wrong” or has neglected some aspect of church life. Non-involvement appeared to be because of a loss of habit in coming, as well as other life situations and priority being given to other activities. It would appear that the changing times, circumstances, and lifestyles of younger people are working against us, with the pandemic creating an additional hindrance.

The Challenges

There are many challenges facing ECPC, and we desire to acknowledge them honestly and accurately. Most obvious is our aging congregation, which gives us fewer and fewer workers to serve and carry on. Many are just no longer able to engage in active work, and in fact a new pastor will need to recognize and feel called to the great need for member care. The next ten years will no doubt bring many memorial services. We currently have a few children who occasionally attend and one teen who reads scripture when she comes.

Our second challenge comes from the fact that we are not the community church for any one town. ECPC is on the outskirts of Craftsbury and historically has drawn from the towns around us. That is still the case. The distances some people come limits certain involvements for them. Some people have found their way to us because we are geographically closer than the church in their own town. Some have come because we are Presbyterian and that mattered to them. Some may have just liked our more formal service and good music.

The “community” church for Craftsbury is located on Craftsbury Common. It is a UCC church with a part-time, not fully-trained pastor. It was founded about the same time as ECPC and has similar concerns at this time. However, there are many people about town who consider it their home church even if they are not very involved or active. This church is the one they turn to for funerals or special events. The building is newer and larger and centrally located. We have a history of collaborating with the Church on the Common for the benefit of both. We will need to continue to do this, perhaps in more ways. In the past we have held joint services with them weekly during Lent. This past Lenten season we held two joint services, one at ECPC and one at the Church on the Common, for Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday. We expect that kind of collaboration will continue to the benefit of both, perhaps with the neighboring UCC church in Greensboro as well. The pastors of all three of these churches have historically had good relations and presently support each other.

The challenges of Covid brought forth new responses. With help from the Presbytery of Northern New England, we were able to develop a sophisticated online ministry with video recording of our Sunday and special worship services. Post-covid, it has evolved into live broadcasting on our YouTube channel, as well as preserving the video on our web page for viewing at a later time.

Our Assets

People: We have a small but committed body of believers who come together weekly to worship God. They want to continue learning and serving in this place.

Manse: We provide a manse for our pastor, next door to the church. It has an upgraded kitchen, two bathrooms, three bedrooms, an office, a screened-in back porch, and a one-car garage with a Level II electric car charger. It is a pretty 1840s white house with large, shaded lawns in both front and back.

Church Building: Our sanctuary is beautiful, with stained glass windows, a hardwood floor, and comfortable pews. It can seat about 120. As mentioned before, it has excellent acoustics. Beneath the sanctuary is a large Fellowship Hall and full kitchen, both presently used almost exclusively by the Craftsbury Saplings and both fully capable of supporting the entire congregation for a fellowship meal or other activities.

Musical Instruments: In the sanctuary there is a newly rebuilt pipe organ, as well as the restored original reed organ and a Steinway quarter-grand piano. There is an upright piano downstairs.

Technology: Our sanctuary has a sophisticated sound system and the ability to broadcast our services and events live onto our You Tube channel and also be recorded for later viewing. The cameras and microphones are unobtrusive and do not affect the experience of the people gathered in person.

Five Acre Field: This field lies mostly behind the back lawn of the manse but also includes a small portion between the church and the manse. It is currently rented out to a nearby farm for the hay. There is a convenient access to this field from South Albany Road. Part of the field is the site for the septic systems of the Craftsbury Community Care Center, a Level 3 Residential Care facility across the road from the church, as well as for the Saplings Portable Classroom, the Church and the Manse.

The Vision

“Where there is no vision the people perish.” Proverbs 19:18 KJV

Craftsbury has been a stable community for many, many years. There are new families moving in, but the prognosis for the future is that the stability of the community will continue, which probably means the church will continue to cater to an older segment of the population. Our vision is to live in the present while anticipating the future. We appreciate our past and believe that tomorrow can be better than today, if we use our God-given talents and assets to make it so. Our faith calls us to care for our neighbors and the least among us. ECPC has a long, proud history of stepping in where there is need and providing what it can. Actively working with the community could be the start of many people realizing that God’s people care about them – that *God* cares about them. With the assets we have, we can continue to serve our neighbors and be a Christian witness to them. As we focus on this, new ways to use our assets should become clear. We can still be part of working on problems that are too big for one institution alone to solve. The Saplings came to us when a building was needed. We desire to continue to be a resource our neighbors can look to. In the 2015 Mission Study, it was noted that

...there is no mention [in interviews with random community members] of our connection with local mission projects that have an impact on the Craftsbury community. The perception might be overcome by more focused involvement in local projects that would strengthen the bonds within the congregation as well as our ties with the community.

Perhaps now is the time God is calling us to work on changing that perception.

The sanctuary could become more of a community center, if we host more events that bring people together to enjoy music, lectures, or programs for children. We need to be open to more ways to offer our building for community uses. This has already started to happen, with our sanctuary recently hosting an organ concert and several events sponsored by the neighboring Simpson Library.

The Saplings daycare is looking to expand and re-locate, and we have already offered them part of our field to build a facility on. We are ready to consider whether other portions of the field might be used in a new way. As in much of Vermont and in the nation as a whole, there is a great need for affordable housing in this local area. Many of the year-round homes in the Craftsbury/Greensboro area are only used seasonally by people who otherwise live out of state. Housing prices are high. People who work on the farms and in blue collar jobs cannot afford them.

The Mission Study Committee believes it is time for the church to participate in community efforts to address the need for affordable housing. This would be a way forward for this church, in keeping with its proud history and presence in this community. The first steps require further involving the congregation, learning more about other community efforts, and evaluating whether the church property would be a suitable site to offer for affordable housing.

Action Steps

- 1) Pray for God's guidance in all our considerations.
- 2) Intentionally promote use of our sanctuary as a place for community events to happen.
- 3) Move forward with the Craftsbury Saplings to help them re-locate, and if they choose to relocate to a portion of our field, to support them in that. When in time the Saplings move from our church building, the Fellowship Hall downstairs will again be available for church and community activities.
- 4) Involve the whole congregation in considering the possibility of using church land for affordable housing, and if approved then determine the feasibility of a project.
- 5) Intentionally develop our public relations, so that newspaper announcements, our website, and our Facebook page are attractive, and filled with current information.

Conclusion

Born of love and concern for ECPC, we offer this plan, based on our study, for discussion with the Session and our church body. As times change, we remain hopeful that God will lead us onward as we strive to maintain a Presbyterian Christian presence in this area of our world.

Respectfully submitted by the Mission Study Committee,
Andy Calderwood, Todd Hardie, Elsie Hurt, Valerie Morrison, and Larry Jones (*Interim Pastor*),

and approved by the Session of the East Craftsbury Presbyterian Church.