

Final Report  
**2020 Visioning Taskforce**  
Savannah Presbytery

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Presented to Savannah Presbytery Council  
August 2018

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## Summary

At its Spring 2017 meeting, the Savannah Presbytery Council formed the “2020 Visioning Taskforce” for the purpose of assessing current challenges, identifying core strengths and opportunities, and making recommendations for the future of the Savannah Presbytery.

The seven-person taskforce met four times between November 2017 and April 2018. Information and data was gathered through phone interviews with other presbyteries, internet research, in-person conversations with the General Presbyter and presbytery staff, and a presbytery-wide survey to collect congregant-level input. The report that follows details the Taskforce’s findings and recommendations in three key areas: 1) Vision and Mission, 2) Administration, and 3) Programming.

A brief summary of our findings is as follows:

- **Strengths:** Though small in size, the Savannah Presbytery is strong in spirit. There is an uncommon collegiality and desire to be together among the churches and pastors of the presbytery. This spirit is most evident in the success of many of the programs we participate in together – e.g., School of the Laity, Leadership Development Conference, and presbytery meetings. A further strength of the presbytery has been a staff who are diligent, organized, and responsive to the needs of individual congregations and pastors.
- **Challenges:** The challenges facing the Savannah Presbytery include the approaching retirement of our General Presbytery/Stated Clerk/Treasurer, congregations departing the Presbyterian Church (USA), a significant decline in annual giving across the last decade, and difficulty recruiting lay participation in presbytery committees. Together, these challenges have led to apprehension about the long-term stability and sustainability of the presbytery. Though significant in their nature and scope, the Savannah Presbytery is neither alone nor unique among presbyteries in the challenges it faces.

- **Key Recommendations:**
  1. Adopt a revised mission and vision statement;
  2. Shift to a 2 FTE staffing model;
  3. Restructure Presbytery meetings to focus on worship, learning, and connection;
  4. Focus on quality over quantity of programming;
  5. Facilitate stronger connections and cooperation between congregations.

## Recommendation #1: Adopt a New Mission and Vision Statement

A key finding from the Taskforce's discussions and information gathering is that many people simply do not know the purpose or function of the Savannah Presbytery. For example, responses to the survey question asking "What questions do you have about the mission and purpose of the Savannah Presbytery" included:

- "I'm not sure what they are."
- "What does it do?"
- "What is your mission and purpose? How big is your staff? What is your budget? How many churches fund your budget and in what amounts?"
- "Many."

To be clear, the Taskforce realizes that responses such as these are not necessarily anyone's "fault." In an increasingly post-denominational world these types of statements are neither surprising nor uncommon. That said, it does seem that there is work to be done as far as clearly communicating to both our pastor-members and our individual congregations the purpose, functions, and structure of the Savannah Presbytery. As one respondent to the survey put it: "How can it better be communicated that the presbytery is comprised of 'us'? A struggle that exists is a feeling that the presbytery is a foreign body worthy of skepticism. **How can we shift that narrative?**"

Shifting the narrative is not something that will be accomplished overnight or by simply creating better marketing materials (web sites, brochures, etc.). Rather, we believe it must begin with a clear and concise statement of vision and mission that can then be used to guide and govern all the activities of the presbytery in the future. The existing mission and vision statements for the Presbytery was a topic that was raised by Taskforce members during our very first meeting. The sense among the group was that they are too vague and too long – they use a lot of words that don't seem to communicate much actual meaningful information.

The Taskforce recommends that the Presbytery adopt the following mission and vision statements:

### Mission Statement

The mission of the Savannah Presbytery is to **Connect, Assist, Support,** and **Equip** our community of churches.

### Vision Statement:

Building a community of churches connected together to spread the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In addition to being concise, the hope is that by building the new mission statement around an acronym (C.A.S.E.) it might be more easily remembered and referred to. The acronym also serves as a helpful tool for categorizing the core functions and ministries of the Savannah Presbytery:

<b>Connect</b>	Presbytery Meetings, Pastor Gatherings
<b>Assist</b>	GP, Council, COM, CPM
<b>Support</b>	Prayer, Monetary, PDA
<b>Equip</b>	School of the Laity, LDC, Presbyterian Women, Summer Camp

If and when difficult decisions regarding programming, organization, and staffing come before the presbytery – or, alternatively, when new ideas or programs are proposed – this acronym can serve as a guide post: How will that decision effect the overall balance across the four areas of our mission? Does a new program or idea fit into our mission to C.A.S.E.? If so, where? Etc.

## Recommendation #2: Shift To A Two-Person Staffing Model

Examining and making recommendations regarding the presbytery staffing model was a key focus of the Taskforce’s work. There were two reasons for this focus. First, as is the case in many organizations, personnel costs represent the most significant part of the overall annual budget for the Savannah Presbytery. The presbytery cannot realistically discuss its financial situation without also examining the organization of its paid staff. And second, the Taskforce strongly believes that the staff structure/roles must be organized in such a way that the presbytery staff are positioned to not only support the functions of the presbytery but also lead our presbytery forward in a financially sustainable manner.

Prior to Beth Sutton’s departure in summer 2018, the staffing model for the Savannah Presbytery consisted of two (2) full-time roles (General Presbyter/Clerk/Treasurer, Business Administrator) and two (2) part-time roles (Staff Associate, Associate Presbyter for Mission). The total cost for this existing budget model is approximately \$185,000 per year, which represents 48% of the income the presbytery anticipates receiving through pledged giving, programming, and miscellaneous other sources.

<i>Russel G.</i>	\$	91,300
<i>Liz R.</i>	\$	68,300
<i>Beth S.</i>	\$	20,250
<i>Jamil el-S.</i>	-	
<i>Steve T.</i>	\$	4,800
<b>TOTAL SALARIES</b>	<b>\$</b>	<b>184,650</b>

\*Salary data reflects total cost to presbytery

The Taskforce’s concerns with this existing model include the following:

- For the past five years, the part-time Staff Associate has been functioning as the key coordinator of many of the presbytery’s core programs. In the opinion of the Taskforce, the person in this role has done an exemplary job organizing and executing the core programming of the presbytery. However, we are aware that under the current structure, this good work has technically largely been done outside of their existing job description.
- We currently have a full-time business administrator in a role that may not require full-time work.
- The idea of dividing up the General Presbytery/Stated Clerk/Treasurer role into multiple part-time roles in the future has been discussed at the Council level. The Taskforce believes that it is in the long-term interest of the presbytery to keep the GP/Stated Clerk/Treasurer position as a full-time one.
- There is a lack of clarity about the associate presbyter(s) currently serving the presbytery. These individuals are faithfully and capably leading ministry in areas such as mission and education, however, the Taskforce is uncertain whether or not these positions are vital to fulfilling the mission of a presbytery of our size in the future.

Based on these concerns, the Taskforce recommends shifting to a two (2) full-time equivalent (FTE) staff organizational model. We believe this proposed model would not only effectively support the mission of connecting, assisting, supporting, and equipping the community of

churches in the Savannah Presbytery, but also do so in a financially responsible and sustainable manner. The two full-time roles the Taskforce recommends are a **General Presbyter/Stated Clerk/Treasurer** and a **Director of Programs and Communication**.

General Presbyter/Stated Clerk/ Treasurer	Director of Programs and Communication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visit regularly with congregations and pastors to promote church-wide mission and partnership.</li> <li>• Lead SP Council in organization and leadership of presbytery meetings.</li> <li>• Serve as "pastor to the pastors".</li> <li>• Develop and present to SP Council a long-range plan for presbytery programs.</li> <li>• Equip and work closely with presbytery committees.</li> <li>• Assist in preparation of annual budget proposal.</li> <li>• Plan annual evaluation of presbytery staff.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate the organization and execution of key annual programs: School of the Laity, Leadership Development Conference, and Summer Camp.</li> <li>• Lead communication across all ministry areas of presbytery via Web site, eNewsletter, social media, and other platforms.</li> <li>• Create handbook and other stated meeting materials.</li> <li>• Attend stated meetings and appropriate committee meetings.</li> <li>• Develop relationships with presbytery members and congregations.</li> </ul>

The Taskforce believes that the benefits of moving towards this model are twofold. First, by prioritizing key roles into two full-time positions, the presbytery will be able to offer a competitive compensation package which will assist in recruiting highly gifted candidates. Further, we believe that this model will result in greater clarity about who to contact and coordinate with across the different functions of the presbytery. For example, when crises arise in a congregation, there will be one full-time presbyter who will work with COM and other appropriate bodies to respond. Or, when there are questions, issues, etc. pertaining to an upcoming presbytery event/program, the Director of Programs and Communication will be understood to be the point-person for finding answers/solutions.

**Additional Considerations:**

1. Current Business Administrator: The Taskforce understands that Savannah Presbytery’s current Business Administrator, Liz Richardson, is a long-time employee whose service is deeply valued. The Taskforce is not recommending an immediate elimination of her position. Rather, the Taskforce encourages the Council and General Presbyter to visit with Liz in the near future to a) inquire about her future professional and/or retirement plans, and b) to determine if and how a shift to a 2 FTE model might be gradually phased in (e.g., can her role move to part-time for 1-2 years and then eliminated following her retirement?)

2. Current General Presbyter: It is important to better understand the professional and/or retirement plans of the Savannah Presbytery's current General Presbyter, Russell Gladding. What are Russell's future plans? What are benchmark dates the presbytery and Russell can jointly commit to with regards to retirement and/or transitioning into a different role? Answers to these questions will help to provide clarity with regards to the search process for a new General Presbyter.
3. Accounting and Secretarial Functions: The Taskforce realizes that this recommendation appears to omit the need for general accounting and secretarial functions of the presbytery. In its conversation and research, the Taskforce reached two general conclusions on these topics. First, given the size and giving profile of our presbytery, we believe that basic accounting functions could feasibly be performed either by the Treasurer and/or could be outsourced cost-effectively on a contractual basis to a third-party accounting firm. Second, we think the secretarial functions (answering phone, purchasing office supplies, etc.) could be shared by two full-time staff. The Taskforce realizes this may not be ideal, however, given the financial realities of our presbytery we believe that it may be a necessary responsibility for executive/program staff to assume.
4. Job Descriptions: The Taskforce recommends that the presbytery's Personnel Committee work with the General Presbytery to develop uniform and clear job descriptions for each staff role. These job descriptions should be used as guides for both hiring and evaluating all employees on an annual basis.
5. Presbytery Office Building: One final consideration is the presbytery's existing physical office space in Brunswick. The Taskforce did not reach a definitive conclusion on whether or not a physical office space is necessary for the future functioning of the presbytery. That said, the Taskforce does think it is worth taking a hard look at whether the cost of maintenance, insurance, and utilities on this building is essential to the presbytery's mission. Some questions that might be helpful in guiding that dialogue include:

Does it make more sense to give current and future Presbytery staff greater freedom as to where they live? Would not having a building free the staff to be "on the road" more visiting congregations and pastors in-person? Is there available space within churches where committees and staff could use when physical meeting spaces are necessary? Could the proceeds from the sale of the office building help fund efforts to reinvigorate the presbytery's overall ministry?



## Recommendation #3: Restructure and Reinvigorate Stated Meetings

One of the great qualities of the Savannah Presbytery is that we enjoy being together. There is a spirit of joy and collegiality that pervades much of the work of the presbytery. Even when we disagree vigorously, we have a history of doing so with respect and a realization that we are all one in Christ. At the same time, an additional quality of our presbytery is that there simply are not many of us in southeast Georgia. Unlike in Atlanta or Philadelphia or other parts of the country, you do not find Presbyterians on every street in our corner of the world.

With these two realities in mind, the Taskforce arrived at the conclusion that the presbytery must be more intentional with how it structures and spends its time together on those few occasions each year when its members and churches gather together. Specifically, the Taskforce wondered, “How do we utilize our stated meetings to not only conduct the necessary business of the presbytery but also strive to strengthen and grow the relationships and faith within the assembled body?”

To be clear, the Taskforce does not think there is anything necessarily “broken” about how stated meetings are currently run. The worship is well planned and led. Meals are always delicious and full of lively table fellowship and conversation. Business is generally conducted in a timely and efficient manner. That said, the Taskforce arrived at the conclusion that there is still much to be gained by shifting even further the focus of stated meetings from business/polity to worship, learning, and connection.

It should be noted that this recommendation has been heavily influenced by the experience of the Milwaukee Presbytery. At the 2014 NEXT Church National Gathering, Rob Ater, a pastor member of that presbytery, presented on the topic of “Relational-izing the Presbytery” (link provided). The presentation outlined changes undertaken by the Milwaukee Presbytery in 2012 to change the structure and content of their stated meetings to focus more on nurturing a relational culture dedicated to the mission of the church and presbytery.

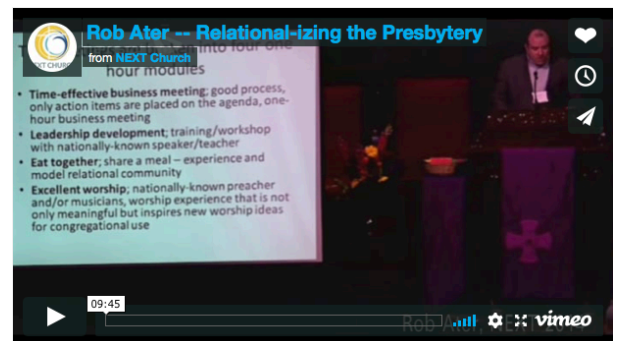


Figure 1: <https://nextchurch.net/2014/07/page/2/>

The Milwaukee Presbytery’s primary goals for changing its structure included the following:

1. Provide more opportunities for presbyters to build relationships and get to know one another better.
2. Allow more time for worshipping together in *excellent*, meaningful, and thought provoking worship – i.e., worship so compelling that hosting congregations would actually want to publicize and encourage attendance at presbytery meetings!
3. Provide a space for presbyters to be challenged and inspired, and for worship leaders to hear what is new/next for the church.

4. Serve as incubator for learning with ideas that could be taken back to strengthen and support congregations.

In order to achieve these goals, the Milwaukee Presbytery began organizing their stated meetings into four one-hour modules: business meeting, leadership development, shared meal, and worship. A basic overview of each module is provided below.

### **Presbytery of Milwaukee Stated Meeting Model**

1. **Time Effective Business Meeting.** Good/efficient process, only action items placed on the agenda, one-hour business meeting.
2. **Leadership Development.** Training/workshop with nationally known speaker/teacher.
3. **Eat Together.** Share a meal. Experience and model relational community.
4. **Excellent Worship.** Nationally-known preacher and/or musicians. Worship experience that is not only meaningful but inspires new worship ideas for congregational use.

Preachers and Teachers Have Included: Walter Brueggemann, Lillian Daniel, Jan Edmiston, Mark Davis, Claudio Carvelhaes, Holy Enchilada, Ken McFadden, and others.

*Further details at [https://www.pbymilwaukee.org/uploads/2/5/9/1/25913310/welcome\\_to\\_the\\_presbytery\\_of\\_milwaukee.pdf](https://www.pbymilwaukee.org/uploads/2/5/9/1/25913310/welcome_to_the_presbytery_of_milwaukee.pdf)*

The Taskforce believes that this is an innovative, inspiring, and best-practice approach to being the connectional church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By pursuing a similar model the Savannah Presbytery would not only be working to reimagine how it gathers as the Body of Christ, but also put into practice at each meeting the mission statement proposed earlier in this report: to connect, assist, support, and equip our community of churches.

### **Additional Considerations:**

1. Funding: The Taskforce recognizes that inviting in nationally-known speakers on a regular basis comes with a price tag (travel, housing, food, honorarium/fee, etc.). We believe there are a number of possible sources of monies to fund a new approach such as this such as utilizing cost-savings from staff structure changes, applying for outside grants, creating a designated fund from the sale of presbytery office, and/or designating a portion of the draw from the New Covenant Fund on an annual basis.
2. Scheduling: A key lesson learned by the Milwaukee Presbytery was that in order to accommodate nationally-known speakers, meetings often needed to be scheduled around their availability (rather than vice versa). As such, in order to succeed, adopting this model will necessitate a good bit of advance planning by the General Presbytery and Council.

## Recommendation #4: Focus On Quality Over Quantity of Programming

The survey conducted as part of the Taskforce’s work revealed that one of the greatest strengths of the Savannah Presbytery is its program offerings. Indeed, the sole point of contact many people have with the presbytery is through its programs. For example, when asked in the survey “What (if any) Savannah Presbytery Activities Have You Participated In?”, 41% of respondents indicated the Leadership Development Conference, 34% Presbyterian Women Programming, 26% School of the Laity, and 19% Summer Camp. Further, in the section that asked respondents to indicate what they most appreciated about the presbytery, these same programs were mentioned far more than any other thing. In many people’s eyes, the strength of the presbytery rests in the strength of its programs.

At the same time, however, participation in these programs in recent years has been inconsistent at best. The Leadership Development Conference is by far the strongest attended annual program of the Presbytery averaging 115+ participants each February. The School of the Laity, on the other hand, had twelve (12) enroll for the class beginning in 2017, but only two (2) in the class beginning 2018. And while the spirit of the Savannah Presbytery Summer Camp is as strong as ever, the overall attendance – especially among elementary age students – has reduced significantly in recent years. Additionally, the pool of volunteers helping to facilitate programs such as summer camp and Montreat Youth Conference is small (growing smaller) and the chances of volunteer fatigue and/or “burn out” appear high.

The Taskforce realizes that participation is not and should not be the sole driver in decision making. That said, there is a shared sense among the Taskforce members that the time is quickly approaching when the presbytery needs to face a reckoning between what is desired and what is possible. Organizing and executing these events takes significant time, energy, and resources. Having a full-time program coordinator will help, however, it will take time to see more consistency and growth in overall participation. Energy and cost must be measured against impact and participation.

As such, the Taskforce recommends that the presbytery view the next 3-5 years as a period to focus on the quality over quantity of its programs. A good guiding question would be this:

**Given the available resources and time of the presbytery, what programs are we absolutely sure we can a) “do” well, and b) will have the greatest impact (i.e., do the most good) for the most people?**

It goes without saying that Presbytery programs are a topic fraught with “sacred cows.” Most (if not all) of the Savannah Presbytery’s core programs enjoy a long history that has touched the lives and grown the faith of countless individuals. As such, the Taskforce does not believe that focusing on quality over quantity necessarily means having to eliminate specific programs outright – although doing so may be a possibility.

Instead, the Taskforce encourages the Council and presbytery to think outside the box. For example, would it make sense to do programs such as Montreat Youth Conference and Summer

Camp every other year instead of every year? Could School of the Laity recruit and start a new class on a biannual basis rather than an annual one? Further, could the School of the Laity be turned into a two year program\* instead of a three year program? Are there alternate funding sources such as grants that could inject additional funding into key programs? Finally, how can the presbytery more successfully promote its programs to individual congregations?

Exploring ideas such as these may help identify avenues for cost savings while simultaneously ensuring that a critical mass is achieved for all our programming.

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\*The Presbytery of South Alabama has a similar program to SOL called "Academy for Equipping the Saints." Rather than being a 3-year program, it has a 2-year commitment for all participants.  
<https://presbyteryofsa.org/aes.html>

## Recommendation #5: Facilitate Stronger Congregational Connections

At the Taskforce's final face-to-face meeting, a member of the group shared that the most significant inter-church relationship his congregation has is not with another church of the Savannah Presbytery but rather with a Baptist congregation nearly one hour away. When his congregation needed assistance on emergency repairs to their building, the Baptist church sent a crew to help. When there was interest in forming an English-language learning class, the Baptist church helped to supply willing teachers. The churches have also shared meals and worship.

This is, of course, a beautiful example of ecumenical partnership that is worthy of celebration. However, it was not lost on the Taskforce that our fellow member's point in sharing the story was also a sobering one. Namely, there was a sadness for him that the strongest face-to-face support his congregation feels on a regular basis comes from outside the bounds of its own *connectional* church.

As such, it is appropriate that the Taskforce's final recommendation is to urge the Council and presbytery to (re)commit itself to facilitating stronger connections between our individual congregations. It is our hope and prayer that ultimately all the recommendations of this report will contribute to achieving this goal. That said, there are a few additional recommendations the Taskforce wishes to make here:

1. Assign Sister Congregations: Consider assigning each congregation within the presbytery a "sister church." These pairs would ideally be located relatively near one another geographically but not necessarily demographically. The hope would be for the congregations to do at least one joint event together each year. This could be a fellowship meal, joint worship service, mission event, etc. Assignments would be shuffled every 1-3 years depending on the number of other churches within a reasonable distance.
2. Pair Needs With Resources: Explore how to identify whether or not there are ministries/churches within the presbytery that are serving populations who may need the skill sets of members in other churches. For example, if there are immigrants struggling to learn the language, understand their rights, and/or navigate the immigration system in the U.S. in one congregation, could the presbytery help to identify attorneys in other congregations that would be willing to assist pro-bono? Likewise, if there are churches serving populations who may not have adequate access to healthcare, could the presbytery help to identify and organize a free clinic staffed by health care professionals in other congregations?
3. Continue Existing Efforts: The presbytery already helps to facilitate an annual pulpit swap and semi-regular pastor lunches across the different districts. The General Presbyter also travels regularly to be in individual churches and hear/see the ministry happening. The Taskforce views these as essential to helping maintain strong connections within and between individual congregations.

## Conclusion

The 2020 Visioning Taskforce recognizes that the recommendations contained within this report are just that: recommendations. It will now be up to the Savannah Presbytery Council to make the adjustments they deem necessary for the future vitality and mission of the presbytery to connect, assist, support and equip our community of churches. We pray the work done by this Taskforce will help to guide the Council in their decision making as they seek to lead us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, into a bright and promising future.