

IMMANUEL CHURCH HIGHLANDS
STRATEGIC PLAN
PRESENTED BY THE VESTRY JULY 15, 2019

INTRODUCTION

We are a community of Episcopalian Christians, with a shared commitment to worshipping God and spreading God's Kingdom from Immanuel Church, Highlands, in Wilmington, Delaware. We have been blessed with enormous gifts—a magnificent and holy worship space, a legacy of prayer and faith, a strong connection to the neediest in our community, a worship practice with deep roots, and a history of generous bequests that form the core of a good investment account.

In recent years, we have experienced falling attendance and membership, greatly reduced giving and income, aging of the congregation, and a widening gap between our receipts and our expenditures. This course is not sustainable, and those of us with deep ties to the worship family are not content to slide towards extinction. In faith we are committed not just to survive, but to thrive—as a vital witness to the powerful love of God, and an agent of comfort and light to the world.

The current transition in Clergy leadership gives us an excellent opportunity to live into our various callings as the lay leadership of Immanuel, and to work to ensure that this ministry continues well into the future. To that end, we offer this Strategic Plan for the days ahead.

The Vestry has identified seven important areas for focus. While they are all important, and they are all inter-related, we have also ranked them by priority, presented here beginning with the highest priority. Within each section (and subsection, where needed) there is a brief statement of current state, including historical context where relevant. Those statements are followed, in boldface, by our intention to develop that area of focus. Finally, each section gives a target timing for achieving meaningful change.

The Strategic Plan is considered to be a work-in-progress, and we the Vestry will modify and update it as needed. At the Annual Parish Meeting, during the season of Epiphany, we will present a status report to the parish, and solicit input from everyone for updates and revisions. We acknowledge that the plan is ambitious, and we are challenging ourselves to launch or support many initiatives in a short time period between now and the end of 2019. There will need to be course corrections. Nevertheless, we sense high levels of energy, hope, and confidence that God has called us to a revitalization of this unique Christian family.

AREAS FOR STRATEGIC FOCUS

1. WORSHIP – Growing in Faith

a. Alternative schedule and style of services

Coming together around Christ's table at the Holy Eucharist has been the center of our corporate worship for as long as parishioners can remember, and we cannot lose this central focus. As much as we find comfort and deep meaning in the traditional forms of Episcopal liturgy, we must be open-minded if we hope to increase our numbers. We will actively seek to broaden our practices (alternative worship structures, music, prayers, etc.) and also consider alternative scheduling of some worship events.

TARGET TIMING: Planning is underway, and some changes will be rolled out in early 4Q 2019.

b. Liturgy education and instructed eucharist

All of the elements of worship that we have inherited from the Anglican Tradition are the product of generations of thought and prayer. "Why we do what we do" is often not well understood, and as a consequence less valuable and more vulnerable to careless change. We will provide education about the liturgy and prayers in the Episcopal Church in the form of instructed Eucharists and classes, so our parishioners can grow in their appreciation, understanding and connection with our worship.

TARGET TIMING: In consultation with our Interim Rector, we will begin this program in the September – October 2019 timeframe.

2. STEWARDSHIP – GIVING, CARING

a. Education for giving

It is fundamentally important that we understand the importance of giving freely and cheerfully to the Kingdom of God. It is not primarily because the church needs money (although it does), but because we as Christians need the experience and discipline of giving-- without any strings attached or any hope of individual return—as a conscious act of sacrificial worship. We will undertake an active educational program, both written and oral, to bring us closer to shared understanding of this important spiritual act.

TARGET TIMING: We will begin targeted messages to the congregation in early October, 2019.

b. Pledge growth

It is reasonable to expect committed, faithful Christians to make regular contributions to the life, work and worship of the community they have chosen to join. This is not pay-for-services, and it is not optional (as we understand the teaching of scripture). We will follow the "education for giving" initiative with a clear, no-nonsense appeal to our church family for sharing in the ministry with contributions of money.

TARGET TIMING: Our annual pledge initiative take place in October and November of 2019.

c. Methods for encouraging and supporting giving

This congregation has a long history of avoiding focused fund raising and alternative ways of fostering giving, other than the “pledge and plate”. Opportunities to give have been largely passive presentations. While there were valid reasons for that practice, current leadership is seeking to develop new and different ways to encourage financial contributions. We will consider ways to make giving opportunities more visible to those who attend. We will also look into ways to permit other methods of contributing, such as on-line gifts and automatic deductions for those who elect to use them. We will be open to using special opportunities such as targeted programs or funding initiatives to meet special, unusual, or unexpected needs.

TARGET TIMING: In conjunction with the stewardship program, October – November 2019.

d. Caring for our physical facility

The physical structure of the church building is widely admired and enjoyed as a sanctified place of prayer and praise. Through its roughly 100-year history it has had varying degrees of care and maintenance, and now faces some serious challenges such as water incursion, stone degradation, and neglect of mechanical systems. We have re-established an enthusiastic and very active ministry to reverse this decline. We will support this ministry's current initiative to identify and correct the urgent needs, to perform a thorough architectural and engineering assessment, and to consider what actions are needed to protect this priceless asset. Understanding that there may be significant costs, we will explore creative sources of funding to support this work.

TARGET TIMING: The property ministry is currently active in prioritizing the building needs, both for immediate attention and for long-term care, with Vestry support. The evaluation stage has begun, and will be substantially complete in 4Q 2019. Plans for stabilizing and remediating the church building will be a focus through 1Q 2020.

3. CHURCH GROWTH – PROCLAIMING THE GOOD NEWS

a. Fully implement Invite-Welcome-Connect

As our numbers have declined, we are well aware that we must grow in order to survive. More important, we need to share the wonderful gifts God has given us with others. The methods the national church has chosen to emphasize are expressed through the “INVITE – WELCOME – CONNECT”, which Immanuel fully embraces. We have active teams focusing on each of the major thrusts. We will invite our friends, neighbors and co-workers and practice evangelism. We will continue looking closely at ways to be a more welcoming and inclusive church that provides hospitality to all. We will continue to seek varied ways to connect, as we develop our Newcomers program and work on supporting and empowering lay ministers.

TARGET TIMING: Current and ongoing

b. Establish closer neighborhood ties

Few of our active members actually reside in the neighborhood where the church is located. While we have cordial relationships with most if not all, we remain largely strangers. This is a mature, stable community with a somewhat diverse population of ages, income

levels, and house sizes. We will undertake to meet and invite our neighbors, and those groups who share our building, to join with us in opportunities for social as well as Christian education and worship activities.

TARGET TIMING: First steps have been taken, further initiatives will be rolled out through 4Q 2019.

4. CHRISTIAN FORMATION

a. Christian Formation Minister for Children and Youth

Our programs for children and youth, both Christian education and social gathering, have been reduced as our numbers have fallen. We are beginning to have a resurgence of very young (mostly pre-school) folks, as well as a few older youth. Stepping out in faith, and drawing on outside grant money already marked for the purpose, we have hired a part-time Christian Formation Minister to bolster the opportunities for the present population, and seek to draw others in.

TARGET TIMING: This individual is scheduled to begin work in August 2019.

b. Small groups, Bible or book study including lay-led in homes

The parish has a long history of small groups meeting in parishioners' homes and at church for Bible study, theme-based Christian education, and mutual support, encouragement, and prayer. We will support and encourage this ministry, hoping to expand beyond the current program of seasonal offerings and a Sunday morning discussion group.

TARGET TIMING: 4Q 2019

5. FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

The goal of fiscal responsibility is to achieve a good and sustainable balance between receipts and expenditures. That can happen through an increase in the one, a decrease in the other, or a combination. Good stewardship, as described in item 2 above, supports this work; but so does careful spending and budgeting, and ensuring that the programs we fund clearly support the Church's mission.

a. Face the reality of the situation—communicate to parish

Offerings and gifts have been declining for the last several years. According to the 2018 Parochial Report, pledge, plate and regular support represented about 31% of total expense. Operating expenses have been steady or increasing. The shortfall is covered by invested resources, and the amount of money used from investment to support operating expenses has exceeded the earnings from investment. We will produce a clear and understandable summary of our financial condition, including recent history and current status, and share this summary with the congregation through a public meeting and a printed and on-line presentation document.

TARGET TIMING: October, 2019

b. Control our expenditures

There are numerous opportunities to cut back on costs without seriously curtailing our program. Energy consumption and printing costs are two obvious areas, and there are others that our members can probably identify. We will begin actively looking for ways to reduce our expenditures in ways that do not fundamentally affect the programs and activities that people value. We will re-evaluate all of our programs to ensure that we are funding those that are critical to our mission to an appropriate level.

TARGET TIMING: Immediate and ongoing. Property, Vestry, and staff will all have key roles.

6. COMMUNICATION

Parishioners have identified a number of systemic weakness in both internal and external communications. The telephone system, the church website, the weekly news bulletin “Immanuel Voice,” the sign on the corner of the property, outside advertising of church activities, connection with visitors—all are in need of a coordinated and systematic update. With the encouragement of our interim Rector, we have established an active communications ministry to energize this vital function. We have engaged a public relations consultant to work with us on standardization of message and materials, including public relations and digital media messaging.

TARGET TIMING: Communications ministry has been organized, and kickoff meeting held 7/20/19. Next steps will emerge from that partnership.

7. SERVICE TO THE COMMUNITY

Immanuel has a long history of partnering with local organizations that minister to a whole range of human needs. These relationships continue, but are strained by the same demands—people and money—that touch all of our parish life. We recognize that outreach ministry is more than meeting a temporal gap; it is an essential part of our Christian development and vitality. We will reinforce and re-energize our commitment to Friendship House Ministries, Ministry of Caring, Seaman’s Center, and other local groups we are currently working with. We will support them financially and by encouraging broader participation parish in the work. We view this as a Christian Formation initiative for children and youth, as well as service opportunity.

TARGET TIMING: 3Q 2019