

Good morning, FPC. I am Shirley Thomason.

And I am Sarah Shumate, and we had the privilege of serving on your Mission Study Task Force last year.

Last Sunday, Melvin Meares and Cynthia Honeycutt helped us “look in in the mirror.” Their report was based on the information we learned from the Holy Cow Survey that we all took. Just a reminder... you can hear the “Looking in the Mirror” report by watching either of last Sunday’s services on our YouTube channel. Or if you prefer to read it, you can find it on the PNC page on our website.

This week we are turning our attention outward... we’re going to Look Out the Window. What do you think that means?

Well, it involves getting to know who our neighbors are and how our church interacts with them. We believe that we are called to understand the community around us; including future trends that might impact the work of FPC. How did our study define what our “community” is?

That’s a great question. We defined our community (or our “neighbors”) as being everyone who lives within a 6-mile radius of FPC. More specifically we looked at those living in Hickory, Catawba County, North Carolina, and the United States. In general, there is a consistency in all these demographic communities.

We looked a recent demographic data and found that the Hickory community is 71% white and 87% non-Hispanic. The next largest racial group is African American at 13%.

The largest age groups are the under 20 (>25%) and the over 65 (>29%) of the population. So, is our community growing or shrinking?

Over the next 20 years our population is expected to grow by 13%... with a significant shift and increase to an older population. That’s something we might want to pay attention to when planning the future ministry of our church. How can we serve older adults?

OK, then how does our community shape up educationally?

Educationally, 44% of Hickory’s population has a college degree or above... which I think our mission study team was surprised about how high the percentage was.

Finally, how about the economic situation in Hickory?

Economically, the majority of Hickory’s working population (>52%) makes less than \$50,000 a year.

So, now the question is how does our congregation compare to the demographics of Hickory?

If you remember from last week’s report, First Presbyterian is vastly different from our larger community in the sense that we are predominately white, very well-educated, and have greater financial resources. Being aware of all this demographic information is very helpful. But I’m wondering, were there other ways our Mission Study looked out the window?

Yes! Another part of our mission team study looking “out the window” involved holding interviews with key individuals in various roles and agencies within Hickory and Catawba County. A few of the people we talked to include the Catawba County Public Health Director, the Hickory Soup Kitchen Executive Director, and the Hickory City Manager.

How did the mission study team go about gathering information from these individuals?

Well, we contacted a variety of community leaders to ask them how familiar they are with First Presbyterian Church of Hickory, and we asked them to help us understand, from their perspective, what the current and emerging needs are in our community.

So, did the leaders know First Presbyterian?

#### **Familiarity with FPC:**

- Yes, all those interviewed were familiar with FPC and had positive impressions of the church.
- FPC is seen as a valued, respected partner and influential leader within the community.
- The church has a long-standing reputation of being a welcoming congregation who invests in caring for the needs of people in our community.
- The church is seen as a community leader that stands out as a large, visible presence in downtown Hickory and we are recognized for hosting many community events.
- FPC shares its facilities and resources with many groups. Exodus Missionary Outreach and PORCH are two examples of organizations that have used our facilities recently.
- FPC has played a leading role in the establishment and support of many of Hickory's helping agencies including the Hickory Soup Kitchen, Carolina Caring Hospice, and Cooperative Christian Ministries.
- Did you know that all three of these organizations' starting location was on the FPC's property?

What did the community leaders think were the **most pressing issues in our community?**

The things that we learned from the community leaders are issues that are not unique to only the Hickory community.

Those issues include concerns related to

- physical & mental health
- education
- economic disparity & stability
- the need for safe and affordable housing
- reliable transportation
- homelessness
- substance abuse
- racial equity
- and, reducing the impact of adverse childhood experiences on our community's children

Were there other things these community leaders saw as challenges and opportunities?

I am glad you asked that, because yes, there were a lot of **emerging and unmet needs that we as FPC could be involved in.**

- Have you ever heard of the idea of “toxic charity?” Basically, toxic charity tries to address chronic poverty through one-way crisis relief when the challenges and needs of our neighbors are far more complex than that. Many helping ministries in Hickory are trying to take a more holistic and constructive approach to meeting the needs of our neighbors and one example of that approach is the NETworX program that has met here at our church for the last several years. NETworX is more about building a community in which individuals and families can grow and find support for real life change than it is about one-way charity.
- Another significant need is for a continued focus on race relations and the building of trust between various racial groups. Going back many years, FPC has tried to develop relationships with our African American brothers and sisters throughout Hickory. This work needs to continue, and we are very grateful to Rev. David Roberts, the pastor at Morningstar First Baptist Church, who is one of our church’s references on the Ministry Information Form that our Pastor Nominating Committee is using to recruit a Senior Pastor. I think that is really special.
- Finally, did you know that only 43.8% of Hickory Public School System students scored above grade level on the End-of-Course tests in 2018-2019? According to NC Department of Public Instruction, this is much lower than scores for NC as a whole and raises another concern from the leaders we interviewed. We are aware that jobs and economic opportunities are available, but we need to ensure that people from all walks of life have the opportunity to participate and work to remove any obstacles. The new tutoring effort through the Hickory NAACP is an example of efforts to remove obstacles for those who do not have the same opportunities.

What were their other words of advice for our church from the community leaders?

- Community leaders encouraged the church to stay open and sensitive to the changing times.
- FPC members need to continue to be involved in government, civic organizations, and other helping agencies to stay abreast of issues in our community.
- Our church must continue to discern how FPC can be a part of the solutions and innovative efforts as we have done in the past.
- The community leaders see our church as a place that wears many hats and provides room and space for everyone.
- Being a highly respected voice in our community, the church can address the need for our community to listen, care for, and look after our neighbors.

### **Closing**

Well, Sarah, over the last two weeks, we’ve covered a lot of ground, haven’t we? Though not exhaustive, the mission study has allowed us to learn a great deal about ourselves and our neighbors. But we haven’t been able to cover everything in the report nor in the Holy Cow Survey. If you want a deeper dive, please go read the reports for yourself. Remember both can be found under the Pastoral Nominating Committee banner on

the FPC home page. And if you have any questions, you can reach out to any member of the Mission Study Task Force, we're listed on the front page of the Mission Study Report.

In summary:

- We need to be reminded of how we are viewed; we are in good position to be hosts, facilitators, leaders in the community in terms of addressing change. Our pastor, Whit, is highly involved in the community which is very valuable, and we hope our next pastor will be too.
- Our church is not afraid to get out and engage – we are perceived positively because of that energy. We are a church that gets out in so many organizations – Remember our mission trips in a span of 30 years have provided more than 16,000 service days.
- The list of challenges is not unique to Hickory – we are involved in ministries that are working to address the issues.
- You remember from last week that 30% of our budget goes out to local, national, and international missions. Both here in the neighborhood and in the world both boots on the ground and financially support.
- This is an outward focus of sharing the Gospel through service and support.
  
- You can count on FPC and FPC will help folks get started and then continue to support
- First Presbyterian Church is a vital part of the Hickory community and will no-doubt continue to be a beacon of compassion and generosity well into the future.

Friends, we hope you found something inspiring and thought-provoking in our “look outside the window.” In Jesus' name. Amen