

2022–23 Transition Team Final Report

Bethel Presbyterian Church (USA)

Kingston, Tennessee

October 13, 2023



Transition Team Final Report—2022-2023

The Transition Team comprised Mark Banker, Linda Brown, Cyndi Fowler, Susan Garner, Jake Horton, Mandy Knies, Rebecca Pierce, and Liz Singley. We were guided on our journey by our interim pastor, Rev. Nancy Coleman, with the full backing of Session.

Before our first congregational meeting, Jake Horton and the Property Team installed a large flat-screen TV and teleconference/Zoom capability in the Fellowship Hall to accommodate in-person and remote participation. We also encouraged parishioners to talk with us and send their ideas by email and surface mail. Counting those of us on the Transition Team, well over 60 members of the congregation (not all of them formal members of the church) participated—a number comparable to our average weekly attendance (in person and online).

In accordance with the guidelines set by the Transitional Ministry Consortium of the Presbyterian Church (USA), our five main focus areas were:

- 1) Heritage
- 2) Leadership
- 3) Connections
- 4) Mission
- 5) Future

With this report, we pass the torch to Bethel's next Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC).

Heritage

Jimmy Carter attributes the following quote to his former teacher, Miss Julia Coleman: "We must adjust to changing times and still hold to unchanging principles." The Transition Team believes that these words encapsulate the spirit of Bethel.

For 205 years, Bethel has been a place to gather, pray, sing, teach, listen, eat, play, give, shelter, and grow. Since our founding on June 6, 1818, as the first church organized in Kingston and the second in Roane County, Bethel has maintained a record of congregational care, community participation, social action, education, ecumenism, and mission outreach at home and abroad—all of these expressions of our concern for "the least of these." If you would like to read more about Bethel's history, you may ask in the office for materials or purchase the cookbook published for our 200-year anniversary, which contains not only delicious recipes, but also a brief history of our church.

Although we have been fairly homogeneous ethnically in the past century, we have welcomed people of all backgrounds from at least three continents to Bethel and into our church family. We have hosted international peacemakers, spiritual leaders from other faith traditions, travelers from home and abroad, Bible studies, music performances and instruction, book clubs, artists and crafters, financial literacy courses, grief support groups, Court Appointed Special Advocates for Children (CASA), a Parkinson's support group, English as a Second Language classes, Boy and Girl Scouts, Tai Chi classes, yoga classes, and families waiting for affordable housing through the Family Promise program. Bethel and its members have been involved with the Scouts since the mid 1920s, and we continue to host a Boy Scout troop in their own dedicated scouting room. We have shared our full-sized outdoor nativity scene with the community for half a century. The Michael Dunn Center got its start in 1971 in the Bethel basement; we have contributed monthly to the 300-student Grace School in Limuru, Kenya for over 20 years; and we have provided unflagging support to the Camp John Knox Center since its inception in the early 60s through a steady stream of young campers, counselors, family and adult groups on retreat, work crews, and financial support.

Despite the long decline in church membership and attendance, and the toll COVID-19 has taken on attendance and financial support, Bethel is still holding its own. We have developed a modest new following on Facebook as people in other places view our Sunday services online, together with Bethel members who have moved away or chosen to worship from home for reasons of health, mobility, and preference. And the financial burden of the 2004–2008

expansion project has been lifted by a series of extraordinarily generous, anonymous gifts—as part of our 205th birthday celebration, we “burned the note.”

What Bethel minister Rev. William A. Erwin wrote in 1925 still rings true a century later:

As the Bethel Church has for many decades held aloft a flare and has been a light to the world in Roane County, it is my earnest prayer that her voice will still ring true to the gospel of the Love of Christ [t]hat she may still contend for the faith which those saints on the hill contended and that these who have gathered there today may go to their homes with higher and grander resolutions and more determined to live and labor worthily. The fruitage of the past is the promise of years that are to come.

In exploring our heritage with the congregation, perhaps most telling were the answers to the following questions:

1) *What do you value most about being a part of this congregation?*

- ❖ Feeling the presence of God.
- ❖ The church’s spirit of humility.
- ❖ Understanding how we live out our faith.
- ❖ Our kids feel loved, and we involve them in almost every aspect of worship, service, and fellowship.
- ❖ Sharing friendship and fellowship, and feeling welcome and accepted. Bethel feels like home.
 - ▶ There are no cliques or overt factions, we try to avoid political division, and we try to exercise toleration and mutual respect.
 - ▶ We value our members’ and visitors’ contributions.
- ❖ Our willingness to make major changes.
- ❖ Our openness to new ministries.
- ❖ We are grounded in serving our community, as well as people in other parts of the nation and world, with a spirit of ecumenism, and have been the foundation for many community organizations.
- ❖ Our traditional worship services and their simplicity and flexibility; they are not over-planned.
- ❖ Our music.
- ❖ Our educated pastors.
- ❖ We remain in relationship with former pastors.
- ❖ Feeling comfortable inviting friends and new neighbors to attend.

2) *Describe a time when you felt especially proud of the work we do here at Bethel; What was that work and why did it make you proud?*

- ❖ Our mission work in the community:
 - ▶ Christmas baskets, and especially including recipients and their children in the Hanging of the Greens
 - ▶ Family Promise
 - ▶ Hands of Mercy Enterprises
 - ▶ Fall Festival charity fundraisers
 - ▶ Easter Sunrise Service
 - ▶ Undie Sunday
 - ▶ Love Kitchen
 - ▶ Angel Tree

- ▶ Free laundry night
- ▶ Shower ministry
- ❖ Lakeside Farmers Market.
- ❖ Roane County Cooperative Ministries (RCCM).
- ❖ PCUSA Earth Care congregation, National Wildlife Foundation Certified Wildlife Habitat, and commitment to recycling.
- ❖ Bethel is open to and used by the community:
 - ▶ Scouts, Tai Chi, Book Club, Bethel Arts Ministry, Grief Share, Parkinson's support group.
- ❖ Our youth ministry, which we want to revive.
- ❖ How we continue to extend a message of love to everyone.
- ❖ Student exchange.
- ❖ Our web/social media presence.
- ❖ How the congregation did the visioning process for the church expansion, exercised patience and consensus building, then grew into our expanded facilities—perhaps especially the Gathering Area—and used them for enhanced fellowship and community outreach.
- ❖ The bicentennial celebration.
- ❖ The LEGO church.

Leadership

The Transition Team held a very lengthy discussion about the manner and timing of Rev. Neff's exit, how we responded to it as a church and as individuals, what we might do as a church to better support our next permanent pastor so they can best employ their gifts, and what—if anything—the Transition Team might do to help the congregation reach sufficient closure that we are collectively ready for our next permanent pastor. Our concerns included the following:

- ❖ We have never yet addressed our feelings as a congregation. The sermons by Rev. James McTyre, our supply pastors, and Rev. Coleman have been our only joint occasions for remembrance and moving forward.
- ❖ Some of us were left wondering how our actions or inaction may have contributed to Rev. Neff's decision to leave, keeping in mind that she felt called by God to do so. We felt that the church needs to take more responsibility for running the church and its ministries/outreach so that we aren't pitched into chaos if we lose our pastor with little or no notice.
- ❖ It may have been helpful for the congregation to know that Wendy did not turn her back on us after she resigned, rather that pastors agree to stay away and out of congregational matters for one year after leaving (of course, this does not apply to personal friendships).
- ❖ Understanding that all things change, especially in our modern culture, we team members hope our next pastor will commit to live in and be involved in the community and be willing to stay for some nonspecific but significant time.

We discussed inviting those still grieving to either a "solemn assembly" worship service or a potluck lunch. However, the team decided to proceed with other congregational activities, and if the subject of Rev. Neff's departure came up, we would allow the congregation's discussion to guide our future actions. However, this did not happen; the church appears to have moved forward and is ready to take our next step.

Based on this and other discussions, Mark Banker and Mandy Knies observed that as Presbyterians, we at Bethel inherit a distinctive tradition of shared leadership that can be traced back to our Reformation-era roots. Authority over church matters is nominally shared between an ordained minister (the teaching elder) and Session, a representative body of

ruling elders who are elected by church members to serve 3-year terms. Bethel currently has 12 elders who rotate off of Session when their terms are completed. After a term off, an elder may be reelected to Session.

Day-to-day concerns of the church are handled by committees or "teams." The organization and duties of the various teams have changed over time. A reorganization resulted in our current configuration of the Communications Team, Faith Team, Fellowship Team, Finance Team, Personnel Team, Property Team, Serve Team, and Study Team. Typically, ruling elders lead the various teams, which also include other members of Session and laypersons from the congregation. The latter typically display particular interests and aptitudes for the work of a given team. The minister and sometimes the Office Administrator and/or Clerk of Session offer guidance for the teams, but they do not ordinarily participate in team meetings. Teams report monthly to regular meetings of Session. Significant actions and decisions of the teams typically require Session's approval.

At the present juncture as Bethel's session prepares to form a PNC to search for and secure a full-time, permanent minister, several leadership-related matters concern us:

- ❖ Bethel's two longest-tenured ministers from the past 50 years (Rev. Dick Hettrick and Rev. Neff) tended to assume responsibilities that, according to the design described above, should have been more fully shared with Session and its various teams. Needless to say, these ministers were beloved and very much appreciated by Bethel folk, and their leadership efforts more often than not resulted in efficient decision-making and effective action. Still, their take-charge leadership style sometimes upstaged team efforts and undermined the system of shared governance.
- ❖ This became particularly apparent after the resignation of Rev. Neff in the fall of 2021. In her absence, confusion reigned about duties of the respective teams—particularly when those duties overlapped. Institutional memory helped us through this difficult transition, but it was not always a reliable guide.

With these thoughts in mind, the Transition Team will recommend that Session make itself a "Committee of the Whole" to address these concerns during the time the PNC is at work. We will also urge Session to seek guidance from the Interim Pastor and information from the Clerk of Session as they thoroughly examine and reevaluate Bethel's team system. Duties for each team need to be more clearly defined, and Session must discuss more thoroughly proper responses when responsibilities of the respective teams overlap (which is not unusual).

Surely this effort will expedite the transition to Bethel's next permanent minister. Most importantly, Bethel will have leadership that more nearly approximates the elusive Presbyterian (USA) vision of shared governance.

Connections

For this focus area, team members solicited input from community leaders, including local and state office holders, ministers, law enforcement, and others familiar with our area's demographics, trends, and issues. In addition, we gathered information from the U.S. Census Bureau and other sources on demographic trends, housing costs, employment rates, income, shifts in area church attendance, future educational needs, and related topics.

Census and other data show that although median household income has increased in our community since 2010, affordable rental housing is scarce and increases in rent have outstripped gains in earning. No major industries are anticipated here in the foreseeable future. Some parts of Roane Co. have lost population since 2010, while others have grown rapidly and are expected to continue growing as Roane maintains its role as a bedroom community for greater Knoxville. Our area is expected to attract increasing numbers of younger families interested in homeschooling and religious schooling.

In particular, the Transition Team identified the following trends:

Demographics

- ❖ The number of people in Roane Co. who identify as being of two or more races increased by 200% between 2010 and 2020, compared to increases of 150% in Morgan Co. and over 500% in Loudon Co. During the same period, the increase in the number of people who identify as Hispanic or Latino in Roane and surrounding counties ranged from 40 to 60%.
- ❖ Roane properties are selling quickly to people from California, where developers are actively recruiting; and from other states, especially the North.
- ❖ New subdivisions are currently being built here. One such development is in Rockwood behind the Walmart. Smithbilthomes.com, the developer for the Preserve at Oak Ridge, is continuing to expand. They expect to have 4000 "front doors" when the development is completed. The newest phase will include apartments, condominiums, and a restaurant.
- ❖ Proximity to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area is a plus, but lack of local recreational facilities is seen by some leaders as a barrier to attracting new residents.

Cultural

- ❖ Substance abuse continues to be a major concern; drugs and alcohol significantly affect the workforce.
- ❖ There is a general sense that the increased population will be primarily white collar and Kingston will continue to be a bedroom community.
- ❖ There is a tug of war between youthful incomers and aging baby boomers.
- ❖ There are expectations for increased future diversity but more cultural/economic rather than ethnic/racial.
- ❖ There is a lack of cultural programs to help new immigrants to our community.

Economic

- ❖ Median household income grew in 2020 by 4.1% in Roane to \$55,578.
- ❖ The 2020 poverty rate in Roane Co. was 13.5%, a 2.3% decrease over 2010. Poverty also decreased in Morgan Co. by 1%, and by 8 to 15% in Meigs, Loudon, Cumberland, and McMinn counties.
- ❖ Rent for a 2-bedroom dwelling has increased 45% since 2010 in Roane, and 15–35% in surrounding counties. In the same period, Roane and Morgan have respectively lost 1.3% and 4.7% of housing units, while other area counties have gained from 2.5% (McMinn) to 13% (Loudon).
- ❖ Major industrial development is not expected.

Faith Community

- ❖ People are moving into the area but not looking for a church home as a priority.
- ❖ Bethel is one of perhaps two area churches offering grief support.
- ❖ First Christian Church in Harriman has ambitious outreach to the poor.
- ❖ The pastor for The Grove considers as a major challenge how to blend small-town values with the new ideas of those moving here from other parts of the country. How do we express our values and priorities while welcoming new residents?
- ❖ The Grove is focusing on a recovery ministry.
- ❖ There is a need for better partnerships with other churches and combining our resources.

Schools

- ❖ The issue of school quality came up with most community leaders.
- ❖ The first question many prospective industries ask is "What do your schools look like?"
- ❖ County leaders consider the primary need to be improved public education. The County Executive is challenging the County Commission to examine the concrete costs of maintaining the status quo vs a more systemic reform. The Commission seems receptive but there is concern the School Board lags behind.
- ❖ The Grove is opening their own school to address this need, Legacy Christian Academy.

Mission

The Transition Team conducted a poll of the congregation in which we asked everyone to give us their thoughts regarding Bethel's mission as a church. Thirty-five responses were returned. One of our members felt Bethel's current mission statement, approved by Session on August 20, 2017, is perfect as it is:

Bethel Presbyterian Church—A Welcoming Community

The other 34 respondents plus members of the Transition Team submitted the following mission statements and observations on mission. Not surprisingly, the main themes are welcome, acceptance, caring, community, connection, worship, spiritual growth, and service to our community. Although they can be inferred, less direct emphasis was placed on study, multigenerational interaction, and outreach beyond our area. Rev. Coleman took the opportunity to use the themes and ideals expressed to generate a word cloud that captures the essence of Bethel.



The statements overlap in many respects, but they are grouped here in three broad categories: Community, Welcome, and Service.

Community—Our Church and Congregation as Spiritual Home and Family

- ❖ A compassionate community that aspires [to] justice and reconciliation.
- ❖ A congregation who truly made me understand that grace is freely given—a gift to me daily from a loving, forgiving Father.
- ❖ A cornerstone; something that has always been here and it is my hope that it will always be here—if not in the physical but in the spirit. Past members and new ones are made welcome
- ❖ A family that loves God, the community, and the world; a safe place for all who enter. Home.
- ❖ Bethel (the house of God): A welcoming community.
- ❖ Bethel Presbyterian Church: God's community, sustaining the earth and all peoples.
- ❖ Bethel: A place where people bond so they can help each other.
- ❖ Bethel: Small but strong, light-filled and welcoming. Never shies away from the truths of the world.
- ❖ Community of faith... worship, study, serve. Striving to demonstrate God's love for all peoples in Roane County and the surrounding area.
- ❖ Connecting in community.

- ❖ Connecting people to God and to one another.
- ❖ Growing together in the love, humility, and courage to serve God, the planet, and people everywhere.
- ❖ Tolerant, decent, and orderly; caring both for each other and for those outside our fellowship.

Welcome—Acceptance, Sanctuary

- ❖ A place of acceptance of all; a place to share time and talent; a place to find friendship and a sense of family.
- ❖ A statement that conveys openness but not wandering, God-centered and welcoming, a church that is not foreboding, truly is a place where you can give and receive as much as you like.
- ❖ A welcoming community of sanctuary, prayer, teaching, fellowship and service.
- ❖ A welcoming community offering love and support.
- ❖ A welcoming community reaching out to serve our community.
- ❖ A welcoming community serving God, humanity and the earth.
- ❖ A welcoming place to neighbors everywhere in the name of Jesus, our loving Savior and example.
- ❖ Acceptance, community, stewardship for the earth, and service to God and Our Neighbors next door and around the world.
- ❖ Bethel has been a tradition where I learned more about my grandparents' beliefs—and I grew very close to them. Bethel events have taught me how to commune nicely with others and be accepting of everyone. Bethel taught me that religion is not tedious, strict, or boring. It is not here to reprimand me. Most recently Bethel has been a sanctuary for me when I feel there's no place else to go. You can feel the love here.
- ❖ Bethel is a place for all regardless of background, ethnic origin, culture roots, political persuasion, sexual orientation, faith or lack of faith, talents or lack of talents, all ages.
- ❖ Bethel: Love shared—free of judgment—with all.
- ❖ Bethel: Welcomes all, cares for all, loves all.
- ❖ I love Bethel's lack of pretension.
- ❖ I love the church in which I raised my two sons. This church preaches the word of acceptance for all people not just the privileged few. Long live Bethel, the shining star!
- ❖ I see Bethel as a safe place for people that need it. It's a good environment for everyone and is a helpful church. It has good people and I have a lot of friends here.
- ❖ Safe, welcoming, joyful, happy.
- ❖ To be a place to welcome and share the good news of Christ with all
- ❖ To be a welcoming community of faith, service, and inclusiveness.
- ❖ To be welcoming and loving to all in Christ.
- ❖ To provide a welcoming community for worship, acceptance, and connections. (I would like to include service here but that feels too long. We could stretch to say that service is implied with connections.)
- ❖ We are a welcoming community living for and following Christ and his teachings. We strive to proclaim and demonstrate His love and salvation to all we meet.
- ❖ Welcome to all, accepting of diverse perspectives, nonjudgmental, caring of those around us, breaking down walls, intolerant of bias and prejudice.
- ❖ Welcoming community, bringing all to Jesus, showing Jesus' love, Christian force in the community, standing for what is just, loving, giving hope. Name that comes to people when you ask about churches in the area.

Service

- ❖ 1) To be a loving, nurturing home to all people. 2) To be a conduit of the love and mercy of God (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost). 3) To be a support system for those in need (grief, new parents, catastrophic diseases/times in our lives). 4) To teach new generations and include them in service. 5) To continue to value the elderly and to serve them as vital to our church.
- ❖ A place where worship and service are central to the life of this church.
- ❖ Bethel is a welcoming place of worship that enjoys engaging and collaborating with the churches and community to do God's will in Roane County.
- ❖ Bethel: Sharing God's hands and hearts to our Kingston community. Founded in tradition and growing into the future.
- ❖ Go out to be the hands and feet of Jesus in our community and in our world.
- ❖ I look to God to allow me to bring truth and love to the world.
- ❖ Nurturing in love.
- ❖ Our mission is: To love God, to follow Jesus, and to serve others.
- ❖ Our mission statement, more generally our purpose, should focus on service and outreach. This is not evangelism in the traditional sense, but rather centered on meeting the basic needs of our brothers and sisters in the community, region, and world.
- ❖ See the need—serve the need.
- ❖ Serving God as a community of believers, we strive to welcome all through service and acceptance.
- ❖ Serving in the world.
- ❖ To be faithful and obedient servants of God's kingdom; to care for the Earth that He provided; to promote peace, comfort, and unity for all people throughout the world; and to answer the call to promote justice, kindness, and humility in our own lives and in the lives of others throughout the world. For we are all His children, perfect in His creation.

Future—Reflections with Implications

From our founding 205 years ago, Bethel has been an active member of the community, generous with our time, talents, financial resources, and church facilities; and rising to the changing needs of our Bethel family, the surrounding area, and the wider world.

The Transition Team respectfully offers Session and the PNC the following observations and recommendations, gleaned from 13 months of research and prayerful consideration, as the PNC embarks on finding a permanent pastor who will help Bethel direct its energies toward realizing God's will for our congregation and all of creation. The congregation has let the Transition Team know that—despite the challenges of an aging membership, shrinking attendance, and changing social demands that make it increasingly hard for young families to attend on Sunday mornings—it wishes to continue growing in Christ through worship, fellowship, study, and congregational care; and through discovering and meeting the spiritual and physical needs of our neighbors as we have in the past, however that might look in the coming years.

Recommendations to Session

- ❖ We recommend a return to a retreat-style training for new officers, which would involve the outgoing officers and include instruction in parliamentary procedure and specific training in the roles and responsibilities of team leadership. Current Elders should have ongoing training in the same. This would include a review of the Book of Order annually as it pertains to church leadership.

- ❖ We recommend that a diverse body of Ruling Elders be selected based on spiritual maturity, compassion, and demonstration of leadership skills, with focus on ongoing and anticipated congregational needs.
- ❖ We need to strengthen and clarify team structures with the aims of gaining more participation from the congregation and restoring a healthy and sustainable balance of governance between teams, Session, and our Teaching Elder.

Recommendations to the PNC

- ❖ We want more robust and diverse Christian education, especially for adults.
- ❖ We seek to be ecumenical, to expand our relationships with other denominations and faiths in the area, in the Presbytery, and beyond.
- ❖ We seek to become better known, to shine our light. That will include expanding our outreach on social media platforms.
- ❖ We want to build a better understanding of our community area and its resources and needs in order to discern how we might best meet those needs.
- ❖ We believe it is very important that our new pastor build strong relationships with the congregation, our missions, and the community, and we feel this might best be achieved if the pastor lives nearby.
- ❖ We favor worship and music that lean traditional, while at the same time we are open to modern anthems and hymns.

Thank you, Session, for your support. And now, PNC: Go find us a pastor!