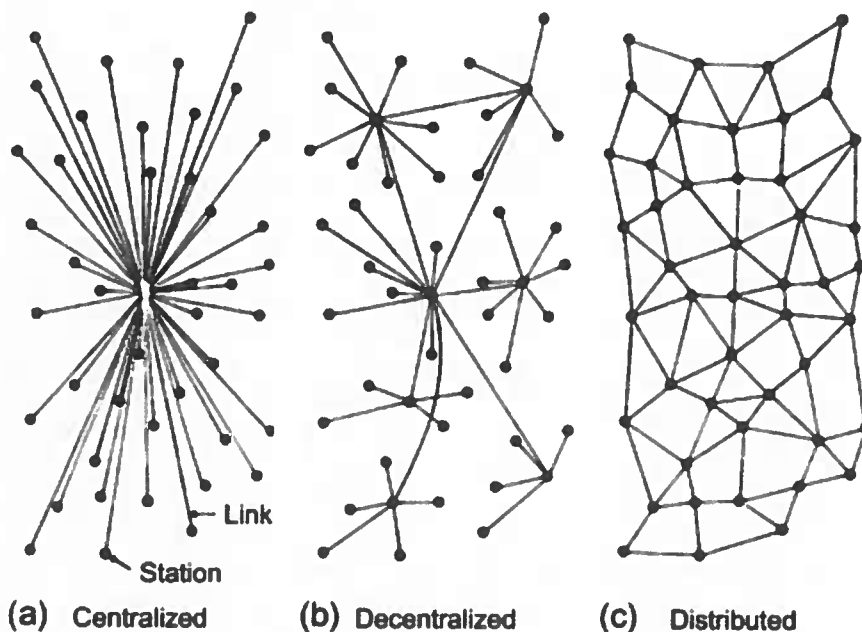


PGR Staffing and Finance Task Force Report to PGR Leadership May 31, 2022

Background

In August of 2020, the Presbytery Moderator, TE Maura McGrath Nagle, recognizing that we were “running out of road” financially, appointed this taskforce to develop a staffing and financial model that would serve the needs of our congregations and faith community while being fiscally responsible. This meant finding new ways to be Presbytery, to connect together in order to serve our churches and communities. We are recommending moving from the traditional centralized model of presbytery leadership to a more distributed model of leadership. A distributed model includes non-proximity based connections as well as a larger variety of connections.



Finances

In 2019, we projected that our capacity to be in the black would end in 2024. Since 2019, we have reduced expenses by over \$100,000/year. Factors include virtual committee meetings, a virtual assistant and no longer maintaining a physical presbytery office. Space is rented within the First Federated Church of Peoria facility for the purposes of bookkeeping,

maintaining a mailing address and file storage. With the departure of the full time Lead Presbyter for Transformation in December 2021, the presbytery has a gap presbyter whose time is committed to the sustaining, maintaining tasks of the presbytery. Our recommendation is that leadership consider having the next presbytery leader serve at less than full time. Some projections relative to the amount of per capita received and hours in the presbyter's job are illustrated in Appendix A (Appendix A - May 2022 Multi Year Analysis).

Encouraging New Practices and Health within the System

In preparation for calling a new Lead Presbyter, we have committed to new practices that are helping us live into the aspirations of our 2020 Vision Statement. We presented the following Ten Action Items to strengthen our Presbytery to Leadership in January 2022 and to the Assembly in February 2022 (Appendix B – 2-26-22 Staffing and Task Force Report to Assembly). All these actions done simultaneously will strengthen our Presbytery:

1. Tell the stories – Communicate the mission & ministry of PGR
2. Develop an annual presbytery wide engagement with our Matthew 25 identity
3. Develop a culture of accountability.
4. Expand presbytery wide educational/fellowship opportunities
5. Develop job descriptions for volunteer positions
6. Broaden the leadership pool across the presbytery
7. Volunteer appreciation day
8. Develop a presbytery database that is readily and directly accessible for use by volunteers, congregations and staff
9. Improve organization of Presbytery Assemblies
10. Continue the development of the use of technology, social media, etc. by the presbytery and within the presbytery

We asked for feedback to prioritize these ten action items. These conversations show that the greatest enthusiasm and interest is in connecting, encouraging and mutual resourcing through:

- Affinity groups
- Connecting with nearby congregations, both PCUSA and ecumenical partners
- Shared projects around our Matthew 25 commitment – the strongest interest is in projects that lead to systemic change. One idea is having a common focus across the presbytery, such as advocacy for affordable housing, which is done in ways that make sense in each locality. A yearly project that raises funds and/or encourages tangible contributions (such as Church World Service kits or RIP Medical Debt) is also of interest while being of a lower priority.
- Nurturing leadership support groups (addressing isolation, a sense of dislocation in pastors and a desire for connection and mutual support)

Those of us on the Task Force find ourselves already cultivating a culture of accountability in our various committee responsibilities. We believe it is time for the Task Force to be dismissed with thanks and for the Leadership Team to step into implementing the four priorities listed above. Such implementation will encourage a continuing shift in culture within the presbytery and prepare us to partner with the leader who is even now being prepared by God to come to the Presbytery of Great Rivers. It will help us live more fully into our 2020 vision.

Current Staffing structure

Paid positions:

Bookkeeper – PT

Support for CLPs – PT, renewable annually

Stated Clerk – PT

Virtual assistant – PT

Bridge presbyter – PT (present focus is on sustaining and maintaining)

Possible future structure:

- Create a new Lead Presbyter position, at less than full time.
(Appendix C – sample Job Description for current PWV Leader position)

- Investigate creating an experimental part time connecting position, possibly using the practices of Assets Based Community Development (Appendix D -Assets Based Community Development (ABCD) at work)
-) and/or the model for current CLP Support person. Initial funding could come from making application for a Rise Up Grant from the Synod of Lincoln Trails (anticipate receipt in 2023)

Recommendations:

1. Leadership Team receives this final report and dismisses us with thanks.
2. Leadership Team implements the four priorities of nurturing affinity groups, encouraging local connections, creating an expression of our Matthew 25 initiative commitment and nurturing leadership support groups.
3. Presbytery forms a PNC to call a part time lead presbyter. The final report of the Task Force serves as the foundation for the Mission Study we require of all congregations within PGR and should require in this search process as well.
4. Continue studying job descriptions from other presbyteries in developing the new Lead Presbyter position in conjunction with determining what leadership PGR needs in this season.
5. Update Bridge Presbyter's job description to include some transitional work, in addition to current sustaining work. Ask for a focus on the new, positive, generative work starting to bubble up, which needs a little encouragement and challenge.
6. Create grant writing team for Rise Up Grant application to the Synod of Lincoln Trails.

Appendix A

Multi-Year Financial Model Update

Multi-Year Financial Model Update

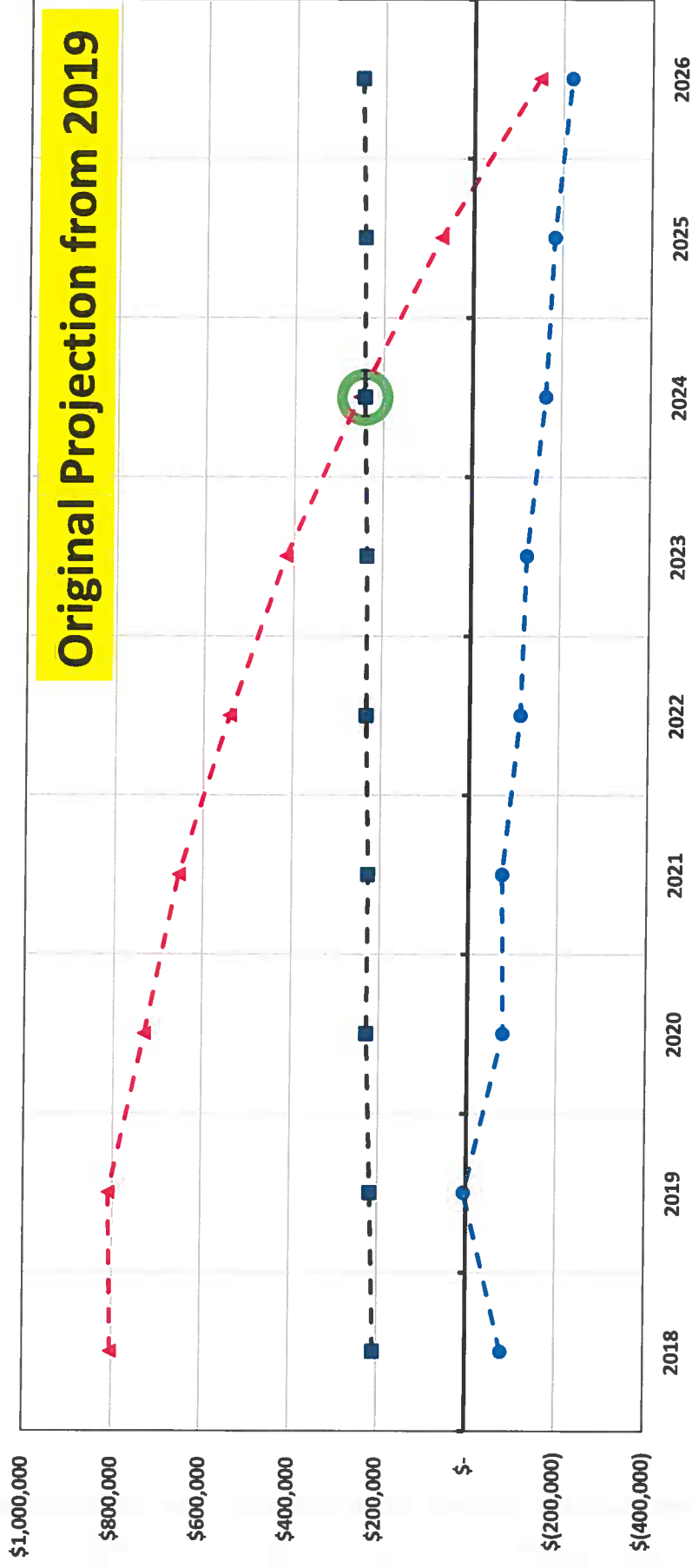
May 2022

Model incorporates recent reduction in expenses for virtual assistant, less office space, phones, insurance, & office supplies.

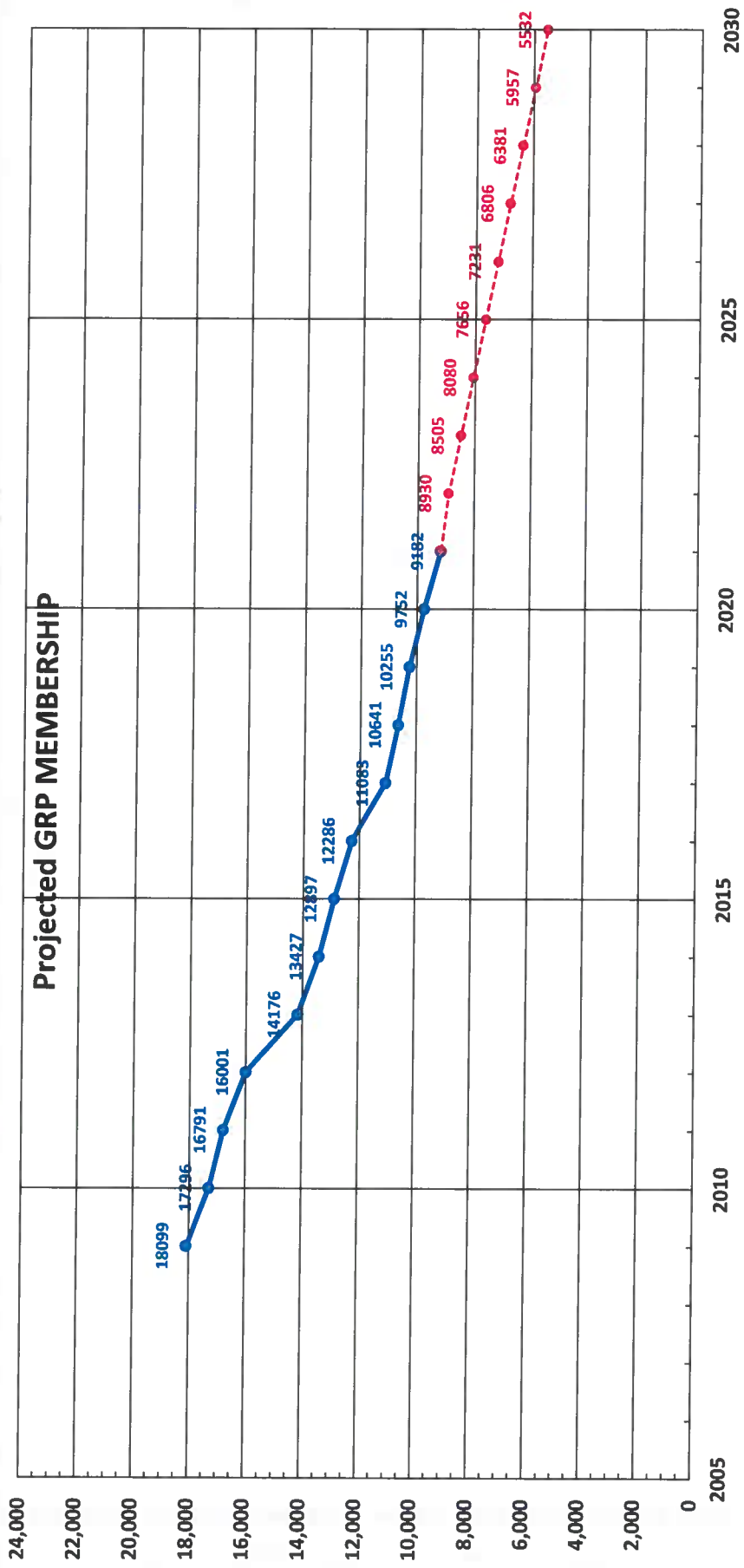
It also shows the sensitivity to a Full-Time vs Part-Time Lead Presbyter.

Projected Membership 1 Impact

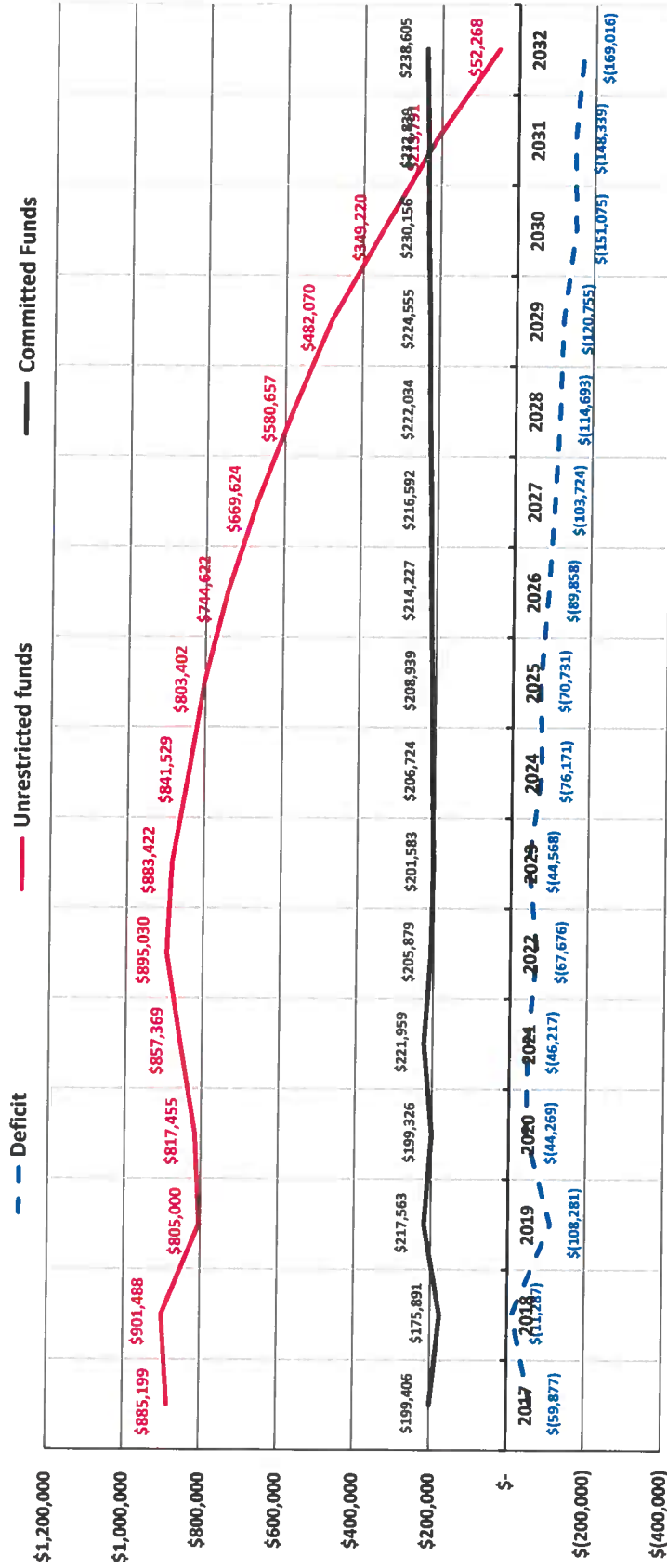
Net P/L Proj Mem 1 Unrestricted funds 1 Committed Funds



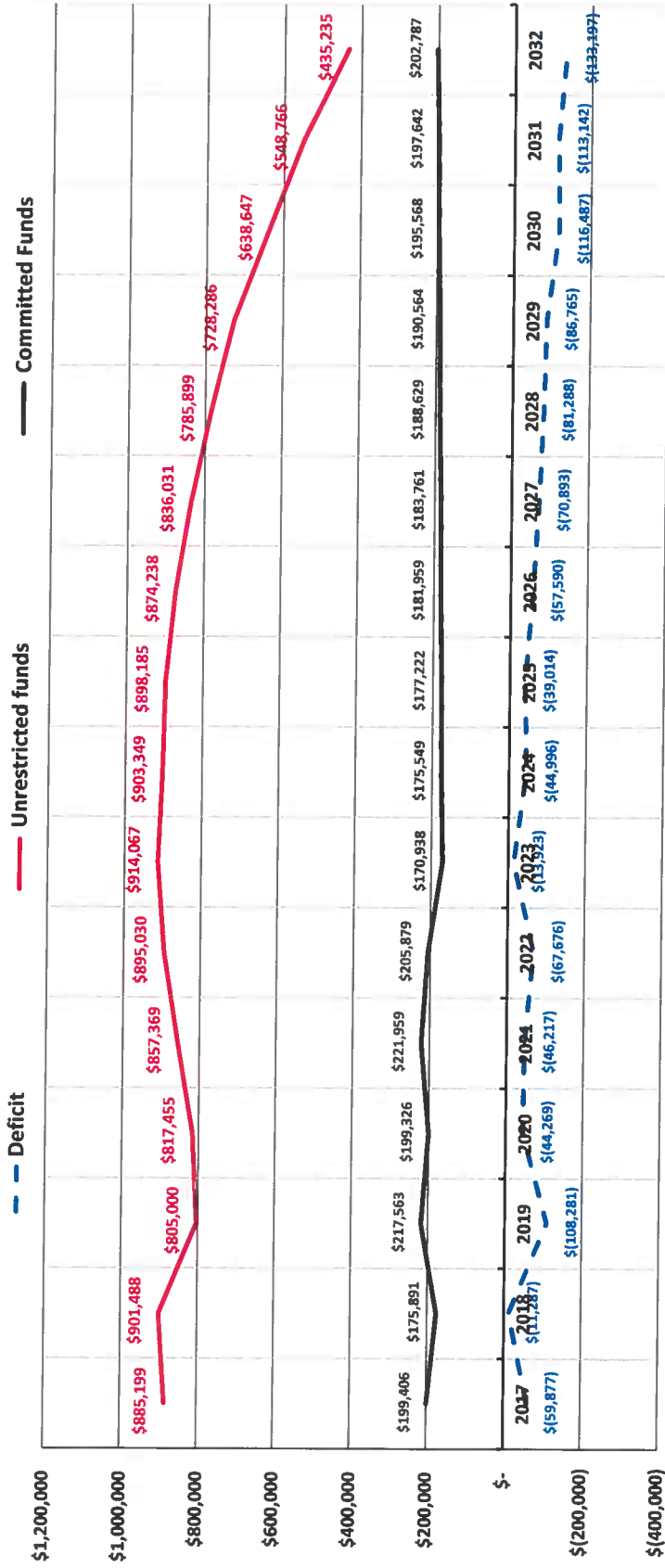
Projected GRP MEMBERSHIP



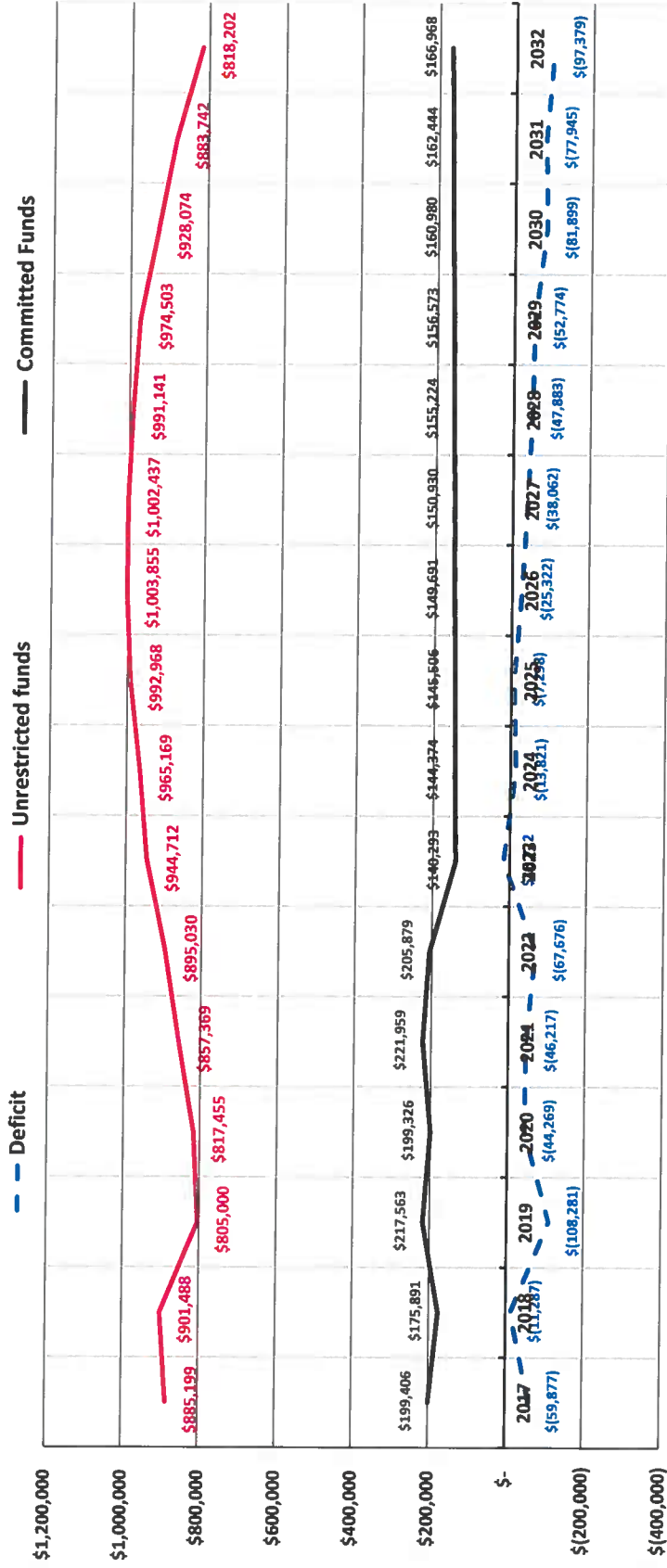
1.0 Baseline: 85% Per capita giving; Linear membership decline;
Virtual Admin ('22) + reduced office ('22) + Full Time LP



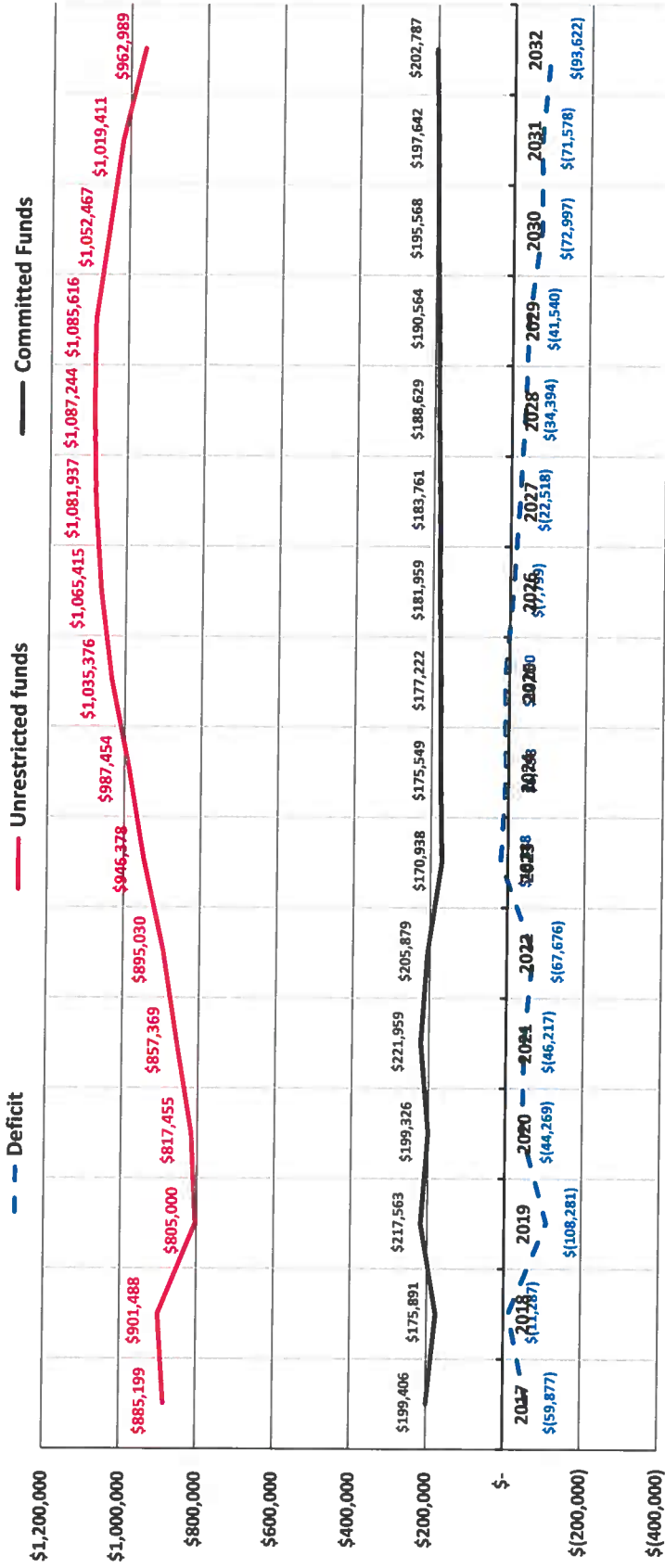
2.0 Analysis: 85% Per capita giving; Linear membership decline;
Virtual Admin ('22) + reduced office ('22) + 3/4 Time LP



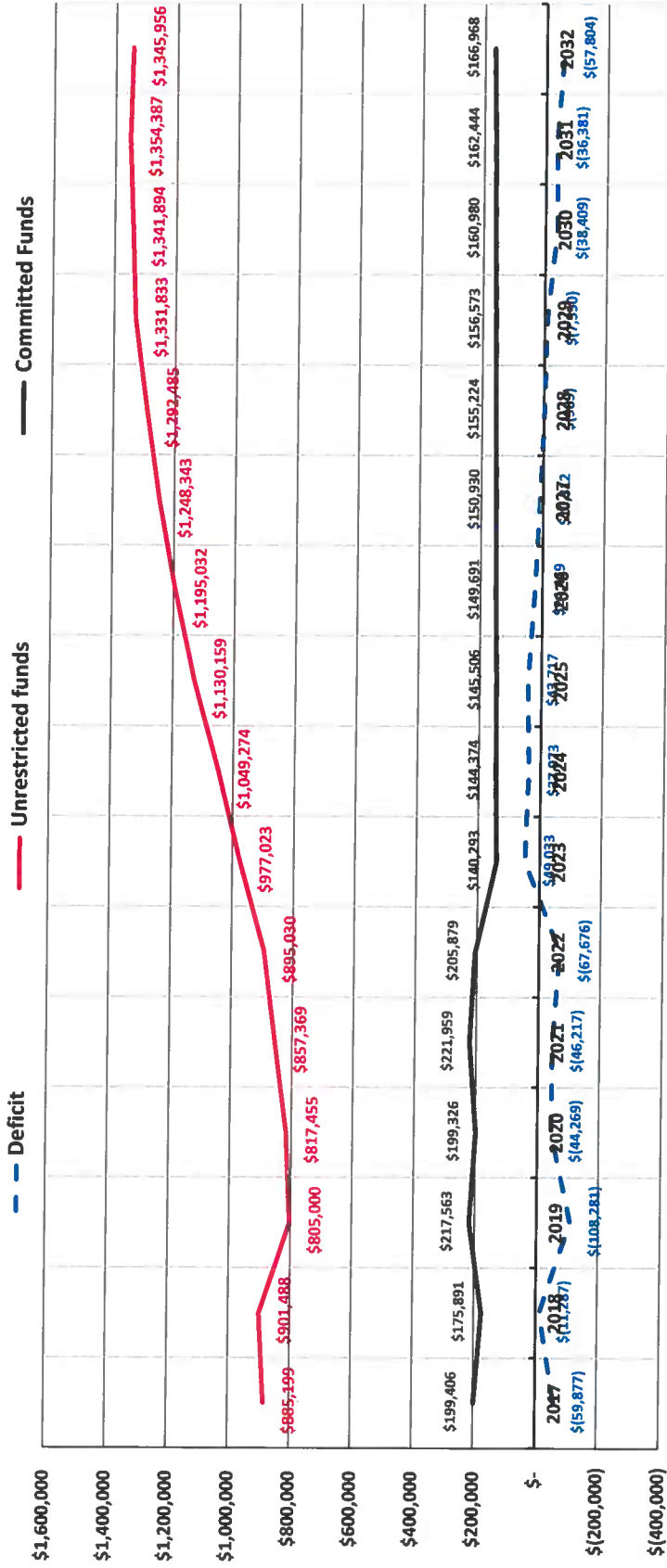
2.0 Analysis: 85% Per capita giving; Linear membership decline;
Virtual Admin ('22) + reduced office ('22) + 1/2 Time LP



2.0 Analysis: **100% Per capita giving**; Linear membership decline;
Virtual Admin ('22) + reduced office ('22) + **3/4 Time LP**



2.0 Analysis: 100% Per capita giving; Linear membership decline;
Virtual Admin ('22) + reduced office ('22) + 1/2 Time LP



Appendix B
2-26-2022
Staffing & Finance Task Force Report
to Assembly

Staffing and Finance Task Force Report 2-26-22

We have begun our adventure in off-road travel! We've found a pathway that will take us much further into our new reality!

In 2019 Ryan Landino, our Lead Presbyter for Transformation, presented us with a metaphor of coming to the end of the highway and needing to maneuver our vehicle into a very different environment. We would need, we determined, to find new ways to be Presbytery, to connect together in order to serve our churches and communities.

The Finance and Staffing Task Force is pleased to tell you that we have now left the highway! Have you noticed that we are moving relatively easily on this newly discovered path? There might be a few bumps, but we're doing it! Give yourselves a pat on the back! This new roadway has been accessed by measures that contain our annual expenses by over \$100,000 from that time in 2019. We have found that virtual committee meetings, a virtual assistant and no physical office can work! We've hired a highly effective Bridge Presbyter to help steady our vehicle. We've created an exciting new Vision Statement which is our map to this new destination we seek. It's all good!

Now we need your help in steering our vehicle on this upcoming stretch. If we assume a Lead Presbyter or other leadership will solve our problems, we're taking on the attitude of so many congregations who want their pastor to do the heavy lifting of ministry. It simply can't work that way! We, as committees and members, need to maintain our grip on the steering wheel. We can't relax in the back and hope someone else will steer this vehicle to our desired destination. If we do so, we will find ourselves stuck in the mud or crashed into a tree. We need you!

As the taskforce, we hope to bring the locus of Presbytery to a more grassroots level, but to have any hope of success, we invite you, our committees and members to help develop the way forward. Below you will

find several suggested actionable practices about how we can BE THE PRESBYTERY in a way that begins to live into the aspirations of our 2020 Vision Statement. It is a recipe, not only for creating the base upon which the road we seek will be built, but we pray it can be the Spirit leading us to health and vitality. We invite you to study this list; pray it; discuss it and find ways to make it a part of our joint adventure into a joyful new reality.

Scripture that guides us

The New Life in Christ

Romans 12:1-2 NRSV

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect."

What is needed is deep, adaptive change. This will not happen overnight. However, we can begin by implementing the following practices in 2022. As our practices are followed, our ministries will grow. Some of these steps are technical changes. Many of these are designed to happen simultaneously. These technical changes will create space for the needed adaptive change to occur. Here is what we recommend.

Ten Action Items to strengthen our Presbytery

1. Tell the stories – Communicate the mission & ministry of PGR

- ❖ Establish a regular publication schedule for the Good News. Ask committees and task forces to write articles or updates after each of their meetings. Recruit a volunteer to collect this content and submit in prepared format to be added to the Good News by our Virtual Assistant.
- ❖ Include links and connections to the larger church (see Presbytery of Wabash Valley's e-letter for an example of how this could be done).
- ❖ Feature a mission story at each Presbytery assembly related to our Matthew 25 initiative.

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of connecting, supporting, spiritually engaging and focusing the presbytery on our Matthew 25 identity.)

2. Develop an annual presbytery wide engagement with our Matthew 25 identity

- ❖ Examples: Go as a Presbytery and Serve, PDA teams, RIP Medical Debt, CWS kits, food bank support.

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of seeking justice and focusing around Matthew 25 identity)

3. Develop a culture of accountability.

- ❖ Ask all committees and task forces and Sessions to choose three aspirations from the 2020 Vision Statement for their primary focus for the year. Each time these groups meet, include in the agenda an assessment at the meeting's end as to how the business conducted/discussed during the meeting has aligned with the three focus aspirations and record these ponderings/learnings in the minutes. **See 2020 Vision Statement attached at the bottom of this report.**
- ❖ Follow up on the meeting assessment by creating at least one SMART goal to follow before the next meeting that will move that entity towards their focus aspirations. The SMART goal will be based on what's just been learned. (SMART goals are Specific, Measurable, Action Oriented, Realistic and Time bound)
- ❖ After two months of practice, develop further accountability steps for the committee or group.

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of transforming, connecting and focusing)

4. Expand presbytery wide educational/fellowship opportunities

- ❖ Host occasional presbytery wide educational and fellowship opportunities such as seasonal Bible studies (Advent, Lent, etc.); Lunch and Learn opportunities; Book studies, etc. with

the presbytery providing Zoom support and recruiting leaders for these events.

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of connecting, spiritually engaging, seeking justice, resourcing)

5. Develop job descriptions for volunteer positions

- ❖ Committees and task forces develop job descriptions with expectations for committee members and send these to Nominating.
- ❖ Nominating committee to initiate conversations now with every pastor and commissioned lay pastor in congregational settings about potential volunteers known to them in their congregations suited to the varieties of service needed to fill the committee positions in the presbytery.
- ❖ Nominating committee to work year round to build up files of potential volunteers. Fill positions as they occur so that committee rosters are full and they can fulfill their responsibilities.
- ❖ Match volunteers to responsibilities based on their spiritual gifts and their ability to effectively serve on that committee.
- ❖ Keep committee rosters by class and use awareness of rotation as a tool to continually nurture leadership within committees (this allows for continuous development and nurturing of new leadership).

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of seeking justice, resourcing and spiritually engaging the presbytery).

6. Broaden the leadership pool across the presbytery

- ❖ Set and meet the goal of adding at least 25% new membership annually on each committee.
- ❖ Each committee to determine how many people are truly needed to do their work and what skills members need in order to participate.

- ❖ Consciously broaden the leadership pool by lessening the current practice of moving a small cadre of folks from leadership role to leadership role within the presbytery.
- ❖ Shift from automatically renewing terms for committee members to provide opportunities to expand our leadership pool and to allow more voices.
- ❖ Ask Committee chair to provide annual input to Nominating Committee. Does member fulfill committee assignments and responsibilities? Attend meetings?
Comment area to note exceptional attributes.

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of transforming, connecting, supporting and spiritually engaging)

7. Volunteer appreciation day

- ❖ Provide recognition annually for service with a luncheon and certificate and thanks, which acknowledges the volunteer efforts that sustain and give life to the presbytery.
- ❖ Send notes of thanks to Sessions for sharing their human resources (their members and pastors) with the presbytery.

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of connecting, supporting, resourcing)

8. Develop a presbytery database that is readily and directly accessible for use by volunteers, congregations and staff

- ❖ We presently have no easy access to this information, which slows down fulfilling our responsibilities as we wait for the information from another person.

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of connecting, supporting and resourcing)

9. Improve organization of Presbytery Assemblies

- ❖ Create a presbytery packet that cross references the agenda to the papers provided; include page numbers in agenda as to where materials are located in packet.
- ❖ Each person presenting refers Assembly to this information and allows a moment for it to be located.

- ❖ Do not conduct business by expecting people to absorb new information through screen sharing, other than if it comes up under other business.
- ❖ Put times on the docket (allow for the order of the day).

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of transforming, spiritually engaging, focusing, resourcing)

10. Continue the development of the use of technology, social media, etc. by the presbytery and within the presbytery

(Meets the 2020 Vision Statement aspirations of connecting, resourcing, supporting)

The Task Force invites you to share and discuss these ideas in your congregation and Presbytery committees and groups.

Will you also consider sharing 60 minutes of your time to further discuss these practices with a group of your peers and the Task Force? Please post “TF Talk” in the chat now or submit your name and email address to Joyce Chamberlin by emailing jchamberlin1@gmail.com. Times for these discussions will be determined according to availability of those who are interested. Your thoughts about next steps are the ticket to our future!

Questions? Contact a Task Force Member.

Joyce Chamberlin – jchamberlin1@gmail.com

Bill Strawbridge – bnc.sbridge@gmail.com

Julio Garcia – julieman6@yahoo.com

Laura Reason— revlaura1911@hotmail.com

Mike Orr – mikeorr1@comcast.net

2020 Vision Statement

We are followers of Christ. We are a community of congregations and ministries bound together by God's love. We are humans who journey through blessing and brokenness, striving to be faithful, in need of connection and community, grace and repair, guidance and support, affirmation and encouragement, solidarity and celebration. We have faith that we have each been gifted and charged to a specific work of ministry in our particular time and place, the kind of work that changes lives. We are a people who accept that the ministry landscape is changing, and that we need each other, and we affirm that God is with us and at work in our midst. We are a body that tries to live faithfully together through covenants

rooted in our love for one another and a polity that seeks to foster accountability to our promises to each other, a polity we have the collective power to change as needed.

Our aspirations:

TRANSFORM We aspire to change, to grieve and to let go, to ask new questions, to challenge old assumptions, to seek joy, and to build different structures that more closely align with our mission. We aspire to make space for new partners, to assist each other with how we may fit into new realities where we may be unsure. We want to move into a new future together.

CONNECT We aspire to be together, connected and connecting, to each other and God. We aspire to keep relationship first and to encourage collaborative ministry. We desire the presbytery to meet us where we are. We want to contribute where we can make a difference.

SUPPORT We aspire to support one another personally, professionally, and holistically, to build each other up, to bear one another's burdens, to create space for mutuality, solidarity, and support. We aspire to listen.

SPIRITUALLY ENGAGE We aspire to be spiritually overflowing and worshipfully engaged. We want to be inspired and to share that inspiration. We want to glorify God above all and recognize the divine in our midst, manifest in the multitude of gifts around us, filling every space in our presbytery. We aspire to have intentional moments of prayer for each other.

SEEK JUSTICE We aspire to bless the range of identities in our midst, to embrace the leadership of peoples long silenced, so we may challenge each other and be enriched by the unique perspectives of others. We aspire to repair, reorient, rearrange, or reject what we must in order to build the Kin-dom of God on earth as it is in heaven.

RESOURCE We aspire to be resourced and resourcing, to teach and to learn, as we respond to the unique challenges of today. We want spaces to reflect on our effectiveness and sharpen our discipleship, attentive to our heads, our hearts, and our bodies. We want to be strengthened, trained, and equipped for 21st century ministry in our local contexts.

FOCUS We aspire to rally around a unifying missional focus by uniting around our Matthew 25 identity, centering the needs of the people as if we were serving Jesus himself. We want to be a meaningful presence in our communities and honor Christ's Great Commission.

Appendix C
Sample Job Description
for current PWV Leader

DRAFT

Presbytery of Wabash Valley Position Description Visioning/Connecting Leader

POSITION PURPOSE

The Visioning/Connecting Leader is to provide visionary leadership, practical support and pastoral care to the Presbytery and its members. In collaboration with the Stated Clerk/Administrative Leader, this person will implement a new Presbytery structure, building upon the work of the Joshua Journey, leading the presbytery to awaken, enliven and enhance our worshipping communities, individually and together.

MAJOR RESPONSIBILITIES

- Lead the presbytery in implementing a new structure that will awaken, enliven and enhance our worshipping communities, building upon the work of the Joshua Journey
- Provide pastoral counsel, support and challenge among the minister members of the Presbytery
- Participate in the life of the churches of the presbytery, through a regular schedule of visitation, worship participation and faith-filled leadership
- Provide ongoing assessment of the ministry and mission of the Presbytery of Wabash Valley, developing and facilitating plans to address challenges and build on our strengths
- Initiate new forms of ministry and new visions of worship and service in alignment with the intent of the Joshua Journey
- Provide direction as the presbytery continues to re-form itself and implement the work of the Joshua Journey
- Be a staff resource to Presbytery committees, in particular working closely with the Council, Committee on Ministry and the Committee on Preparation for Ministry
- Coordinate the Presbytery staff through regular meetings
- Develop lay leadership and encourage participation in the work of the Presbytery by all churches of the Presbytery.
- To keep abreast of renewal resources and conferences, to help the Presbytery renew and revitalize our congregations for a new generation of believers
- Assist in the training of work group and committee leaders, equipping pastors, elders and leaders for evangelism, leadership and service
- Interpret policies of the PC (USA) to the public as needed
- Relate to local seminaries, the Synod of Lincoln Trails, and the General Assembly to discover and share resources for our shared mission

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Visioning/Connecting Leader will demonstrate:

- A deep, contagious, and abiding faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior with a willingness to live the faith in daily life and work
- A visionary, forward looking leadership style

- An ability to listen respectfully and fairly to all voices to facilitate healing, caring and a safe atmosphere for discussion of our work together.
- Sensitivity to the needs of a diverse community, the challenges presented by rural, city and suburban churches and ministry
- Solid experience as a middle governing body church leader
- Integrity of character, maturity in faith and action
- Respect for the Presbyterian Church (USA) and our Reformed theology, its history, its heritage, its polity, its processes and its mission in the world.

PROFESSIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

A Teaching Elder or a Ruling Elder in the PCUSA with demonstrated experience and skills in the following:

- Visionary Leadership: One who can formulate, initiate and implement creative models and practices of ministry
- Pastoral Leadership: One who can confidentially care for the needs of others, in particular serving as a pastor to pastors and caring for leaders of struggling churches
- Organizational Leadership: One who can put feet to a vision and work towards practical implementation of clear goals
- Equipping Leadership: A team player who will share ministry with Presbytery staff and presbyters. One who encourages participation and assists in leadership development
- Reformed Leadership: Experience and knowledge of Presbyterian polity, history and process

STATUS

- .75 FTE, Exempt
- Head of Staff
- Designated contract for a 3 year time period
- Annual Review
- Board of Pensions benefits

Appendix D
Assets Based Community
Development (ABCD) at work

[MISSIONS & COMMUNITY JUSTICE VOCATION](#)

What brings you joy? An urban neighborhood strengthens its community by asking unexpected questions

The Learning Tree initiative takes a different route to enhancing community by focusing on talents and gifts — not poverty.



Artist AG holds up a photo taken of him by Wildstyle Paschall who is displaying his work at an event for The Learning Tree in Indianapolis. *Photo by Wildstyle Paschall*

[Link to author Shari Finnell](#)

By [Shari Finnell](#) Journalist

TUESDAY, MARCH 22, 2022

When faced with an inability to pay their rent, mortgage or utilities, a situation confronting millions of American households in the wake of a pandemic, families or individuals are often asked to fill out lengthy forms to determine their eligibility for financial assistance.

The application process can be impersonal, even invasive. Applicants fill out details about household income and payment history and provide documentation of expenses, bills and previous payments.

However, residents in an inner-city neighborhood of Indianapolis completing similar paperwork for the nonprofit The Learning Tree come across at least a few probably unexpected differences. For one, the form consists of only a single page instead of three or four. And then two unusual questions at the end, under a section titled “Tell Me About You,” ask simply, “What are you good at?” and, “What brings you and your family joy?”

Those types of questions are at the heart of the mission of The Learning Tree, an organization that seeks to improve the quality of lives of people, communities, schools and businesses using a model called asset-based community development, or ABCD for short.

Instead of viewing low-income neighborhoods as areas that require outside help — handouts — to flourish, the team behind The Learning Tree seeks out ways to explore and tap into the gifts of residents to help support their neighbors in the Riverside, United Northwest and Clifton Place communities. All have a lower median household income than most neighborhoods in Indianapolis.

“There are people in neighborhoods, especially Black and brown neighborhoods, whose talents are untapped,” said De’Amon Harges, the creator of The Learning Tree and a resident of the area the organization serves.

“All of the people that are in our circle have a responsibility to be a witness of where God is working, particularly people in low-income places that are covered up — whose gifts and talents are unseen,” he said. “We need to find those gifts so they can be utilized in ways that build community, economy and mutual delight.”

Harges’ interactions with residents, primarily one-on-one conversations while walking through neighborhoods, regularly lead to projects.

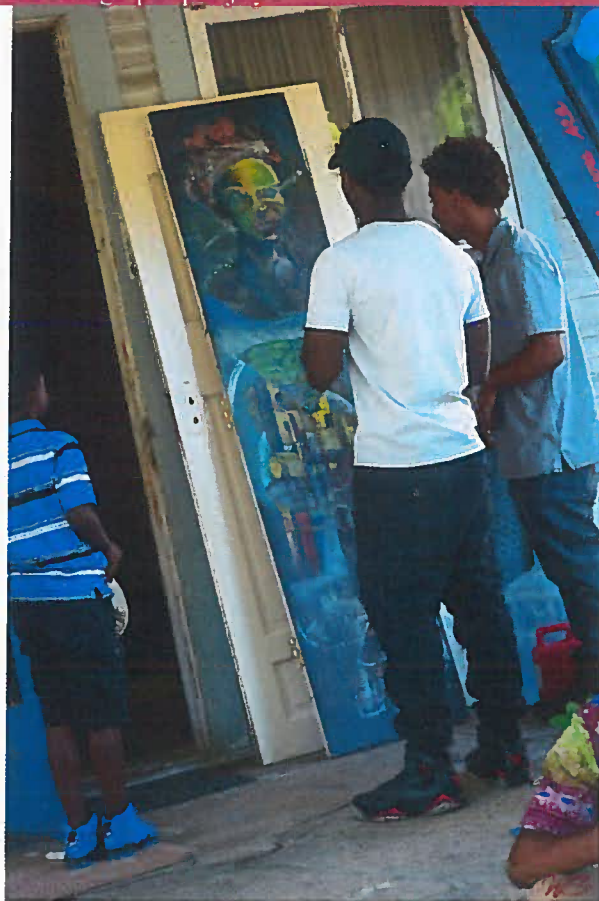
Gardeners provide produce for a community that is designated a food desert. Poets, storytellers and photographers document stories about their neighbors. Artists beautify the neighborhood with their work, and entrepreneurs mentor local youth.



[The Learning Tree among 2021 winners](#)

Leadership Education at Duke Divinity recognizes institutions that act creatively in the face of challenges while remaining faithful to their mission and convictions. Winners receive \$10,000 to continue their work.

How do you provide opportunities to talk about what brings people joy?



Residents beautify several found doors to brighten up the neighborhood. *Photos by Wildstyle Paschall*

Harges has been immersed in this type of neighborhood work for nearly 20 years, going back to when he was tapped to become a “roving listener” for Broadway United Methodist Church, an urban congregation in Indianapolis. Recognizing Harges’ gift for making connections and developing friendships, the Rev. Mike Mather asked him to go throughout the surrounding community to talk to people individually. The goal was to learn more about the gifts they had to share instead of

focusing on their needs and what was wrong in the neighborhood, whether high crime rates, high vacancy rates or vandalism.

Indianapolis Deputy Mayor Jeff Bennett, who has been familiar with Harges' work for more than 15 years, said the relationship-driven approach to community building has numerous advantages.

"There is more to community development than just dollars in, dollars out," Bennett said. "As much, if not more, impact can be made at the human level through relationship building. So often at the government level, we can be so top-down. We devise and fund programs that we think communities want or need without listening to what a neighborhood says it could use in order to direct their own future.

"That's where an organization like The Learning Tree excels so well," Bennett said. "They can get to the heart of a neighborhood's concern much more quickly and comprehensively than other organizations that do community development."

Community building focused on relationships

Amanda Wolf, who oversees organizational and administrative work for The Learning Tree, often joins Harges and other Learning Tree partners as they walk through their neighborhood. During one of those walks in 2018, they started talking to several youth who were performing bike tricks.

"De'Amon asked them what they would like to see in their neighborhood and how they would like to spend their summers," she said.

That particular conversation led to the development of a bike shop in Wolf's garage, supported by 50 bikes donated by the Indianapolis Police Department. A neighbor with experience repairing bicycles trained the youth in how to fix, clean and sell the bikes.

"What I've learned over the years is that there really weren't any needs except the need to be seen," Wolf said. "Mainly what we've done through the years is shine light on the gifts that are already in our community, to let people know about them. The more we can do that, the better off our communities will be. We need to let everybody know what a diamond we have here."

What are you doing to uncover gifts and talents in your community?



A volunteer helps local kids learn how to repair and build bikes. *Photo courtesy of Amanda Wolf*

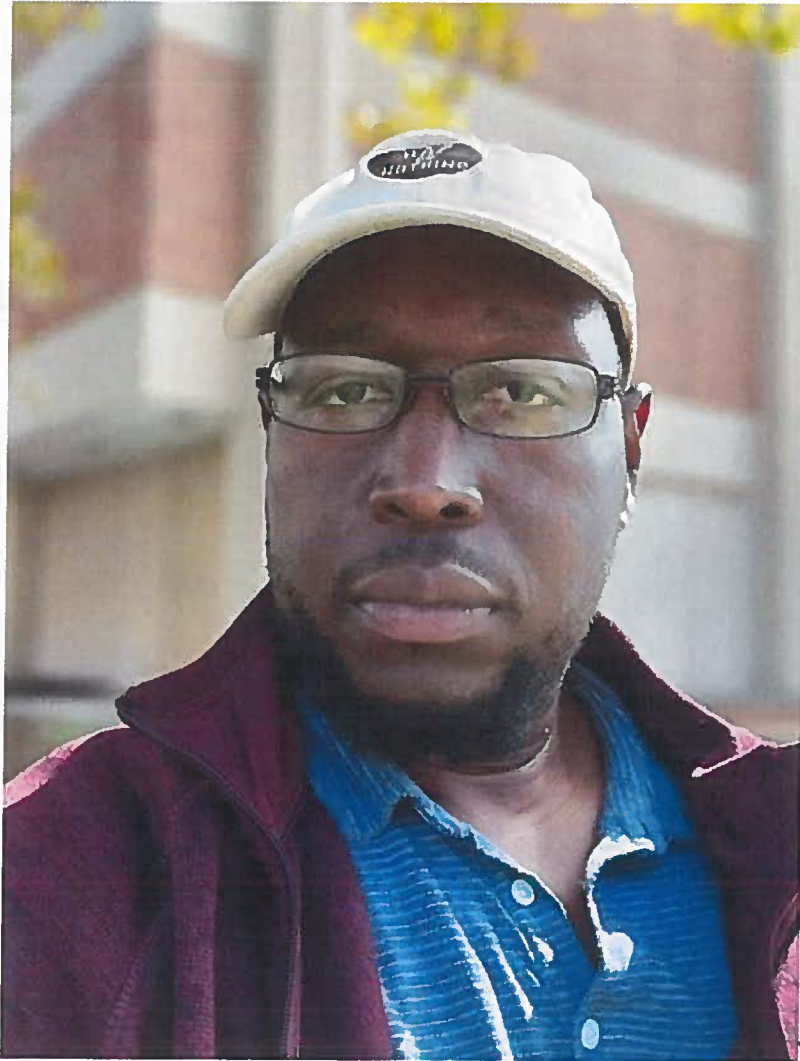
Other projects have emerged as a result of such conversations — repurposing discarded doors into works of art, covering boarded-up

homes with enlarged photographs of residents, engaging in a neighborhood beautification project.

Harges noted that the beautification project was a great example of challenging the way city officials and organizations typically think about helping impoverished neighborhoods.

“There were grants about beautifying neighborhoods like ours with art,” he said. “There was probably \$150,000 on the table to pay someone else from outside to do the work. My neighbor Wildstyle came up with a list of 45 artists in a four-block radius around where we live. We ended up getting that grant, putting that money into the hands of people with talent right here in the neighborhood.”

While outsiders may be challenged by negative perceptions about life in a low-income neighborhood, residents themselves may be challenged by them as well. That was the case with Wildstyle Paschall, an illustrator for The Learning Tree since 2015.



Wildstyle Paschall

Paschall, who is also a music producer, photographer, activist and author, remembers the time he first had a conversation with Harges. After learning about the work Harges was doing in their community, as well as his consulting experiences abroad and nationally, Paschall had a moment of disbelief.

“I’m thinking, ‘Why are you still in this neighborhood?’ Here is a guy living on the same street as me and he’s done all these things and has been to all these different places,” Paschall said. “I realize he’s not the

only person in the neighborhood who has been around and done some things, but that was kind of a blind spot.”

Paschall said that exchange made him realize how easy it is to perceive low-income neighborhoods, including his own, as having only deficits.

“It’s easy to feed into that mindset that the residents have nothing to offer,” Paschall said. “It’s easy to essentially write off everybody who is impoverished. Everyone has the capacity to be doing great things, and many times they are doing amazing things. We’re just not seeing that in each other, even in our own neighborhoods.”



Residents connect on De'Amon Harges' porch in urban Indianapolis. *Photo courtesy of Amanda Wolf*

Tysa Ahmad, the owner of Mother Love's Garden, was among a group of neighbors who took the initiative to address needs following the simultaneous closures of grocery stores in several nearby neighborhoods. She decided to retire from her work in the insurance industry to become an urban farmer to support a co-op that closely follows the ABCD model.

"Those who have the means pay more for a bag, which helps cover the costs for those who don't necessarily have the means, including seniors and those who have SNAP or EBT," said Ahmad, who met members of The Learning Tree while working in one of her neighborhood gardens.

Following that interaction, The Learning Tree has supported her urban farming enterprise, which now regularly hosts a five-week summer camp in the neighborhood to teach youth about produce gardening, careers in agriculture and the health benefits of vegetables and fruit.

Going out into neighborhoods

As Paschall noted, The Learning Tree's efforts model Jesus' ministry in some ways. "He was out in the streets. He set the standard of going around, talking to people and creating that community," he said.

Too often, Harges said, good-intentioned people deny others the opportunity to use their gifts, primarily by focusing exclusively on the needs of those they're wanting to serve.

When you serve those around you, are you focusing on needs or gifts?



An event put on by The Learning Tree serves as a forum for local artists to highlight their work. *Photo by Wildstyle Paschall*

“The only thing that they’re asked is, ‘What help do you need?’ ‘What food giveaway do you want to go to?’ or, ‘How can we fix what we have discovered?’” he said. “Most people, when you talk to them, have dreams, or they want to contribute to something. The need to be needed is across the board. Even in our congregations, we miss the fact that when we hoard all the giving to ourselves, there are other people that need to be needed.”

Harges cites one of his favorite biblical texts, 2 Kings 4:1-7, in which the prophet Elisha tells a widow in need to pay her debts by going to her

neighbors and asking to borrow jars. "It didn't say, "Go to the township trustee or to the food pantry,"" he said. "It said, 'Go to your neighbors.'"

Congregations, groups or individuals interested in adopting an ABCD approach should start by exploring their own gifts and then finding people to work with to implement those mutually gift-affirming practices, Harges said.

What gift-affirming practices are already present in your work?

As a nonprofit, The Learning Tree has not sought out many grants besides a few small-sized grants to help run the summer bike shop for youth, Wolf said. Most of their work, including payments for managers who run programs, is funded by 20% of the income generated by their consulting work, she said. The Central Indiana Community Foundation also supports the nonprofit's roving work through a partnership that focuses on a community ambassador project.

Deputy Mayor Bennett said that churches are ideally positioned to make an impact in the same way.

"Church members and non-church members, including residents, have their own social capital. It's easy for us to get caught up in what we don't have," Bennett said. "Churches are uniquely positioned to look at what their community does have. ... You have so much wealth, so much experience and so much capacity in unforeseen areas."

Efforts like The Learning Tree can lead to a new way of thinking about what should be considered a healthy neighborhood. A healthy neighborhood isn't a rich neighborhood, Bennett said. It's a connected one.

How connected is your neighborhood?

Questions to consider

- How do you provide opportunities to talk about what brings people joy?
- What are you doing to uncover gifts and talents in your community?
- When you serve those around you, are you focusing on needs or gifts?
- What gift-affirming practices are already present in your work?
- How connected is your neighborhood?