

Plymouth Congregational Church

Advancing Plymouth Church, 2019–2022

A Visioning Document from the Growth Task Force
By the Growth Task Force members

2019

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to a problem. But rather it is
an opportunity to change
to become more of what we are
called to be as a congregation.*

Minneapolis, Minn.

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Introduction

What is *growth*?

This was the first question confronting the Growth Task Force (GTF) when it began its work in fall 2018. Initially, we focused on declining membership, which would likely result in a funding decline and so impact Plymouth's ability to maintain its programs, services and facilities. Thus, increasing our membership count would have been the "solution" to the problem of "not enough money."

But to increase membership would require defying a worldwide trend of declining membership among all Christian congregations. Thus, the GTF gradually realized that what is needed is *change* that allows Plymouth to vibrantly expand the ways it embodies and lives its purposes. Thus "growth" is not a solution to a narrowly defined problem; *rather, "growth" is an opportunity to change to become more of what we are called to be as a congregation.*

This document is the culmination of the GTF's nearly year-long efforts. To do its work, the GTF engaged in a rigorous discernment process that involved observation of Plymouth, study of trends in religious participation, careful analysis, and contemplation and prayer on the issue of church growth. As a result, the GTF embraces the reality that religious participation is fundamentally changing; thus, Plymouth, too, must continue to change to remain relevant to and central in the spiritual lives of our members today and of our heirs tomorrow.

Growth is not a solution to a problem but rather it is an opportunity to change to become more of what we are called to be as a congregation.

Along with new beginnings, change inevitably brings endings to that which is familiar, and that can be unsettling. In addition, many exciting changes are already underway at Plymouth. This natural and often subtle evolution allows us to respond to the perspectives and needs of new generations and new ways of living that influence how we wish to worship. The GTF encourages and endorses these ongoing natural changes. But the GTF also challenges us all to open our hearts and minds to experimentation with further deliberate changes. That openness will help us usher in new and even more relevant spiritual experiences for all who yearn for a connection to the divine in community with others.

This Advancing Plymouth document describes ten areas of growth that the GTF believes will provide guidance and focus for our deliberate and ongoing efforts to change. We also offer a far-from-complete list of ideas and actions to consider—a list intended to serve not as prescriptions but rather as inspiration. Finally, we remind you that *growth* is not a task with a beginning and an end; rather, it's a continuous and healthy process, a process that requires the active participation of all who care about Plymouth.

—Lynn Moline, chair, for the Growth Task Force

The Purposes of the Church

We, the people of Plymouth Congregational Church,
humbly seek and serve God within, among, and beyond ourselves.

- Within -

**We find sanctuary for our spiritual journey
in the Congregational tradition. We:**

Seek the sacred in ourselves and all others.

Cultivate our deepest and best selves.

Nurture our capacity to love.

Live in the hope of renewal and transformation.

- Among -

**We walk together in covenanted Christian
community. We:**

Care for one another.

Cultivate a spirit of gratitude, love, joy,
compassion and inclusion.

Honor many pathways to the sacred.

Deepen our understanding of our faith tradition.

Nurture a welcoming culture to all.

- Beyond -

**God's creation benefits from
our love lived out in the world. We:**

Invest our time, talent, and treasure consistent with our values.

Serve people in need.

Advance human rights.

Further social, economic, racial and environmental justice.

Share our vision of progressive Christianity, while respecting all faith traditions.

Ten Areas for Growth and Change

Through its months of work, the GTF identified ten areas that present significant opportunities for life-giving change and growth at Plymouth. The GTF believes that growth in any and all of these areas will enable Plymouth to more fully live its purposes. And in more fully living our purposes, Plymouth's light may shine in a way that may have the happy consequence of attracting new members and encouraging sustained and robust participation.

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Some Notes about the Ten Areas for Growth and Change

- The "possible ideas for change" shown for each growth area are intended to serve as examples to inspire more ideas about what Plymouth can do—or continue doing—over the coming years to change in ways that allow us to more fully live our purposes. The detailed GTF report submitted to the Leadership Council lists dozens more possible ideas for growth and change.
- The Ten Areas for Growth and Change are listed in ranked priority order of impact as determined by the GTF's discernment and evaluation process.

- Listed under each growth area are suggested primary implementers. The Leadership Council will identify implementers and direct them to determine how progress and growth will be measured. In this way, accountability is established and the success of Plymouth's growth efforts can be gauged and tracked.
- *Please see Appendix A: Possible Accountability and Progress Indicators*

1. Growth in community and fellowship within

The GTF recognizes that growth in community feeling and fellowship are high priority areas for many individuals in our society and so also for our congregation. They are, in fact, among our Purposes. We want to continuously look for ways to strengthen a sense of a supportive community for each and every person who walks through our doors in order to live out our purposes and address the widespread loneliness in our society. Any growth in meaningful opportunities for people to experience a deep and abiding connection to a caring community will strengthen our congregation. The challenge is to do so in our busy 21st century way of life.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Ask every member to commit to participating regularly in at least one Plymouth group or activity.
- Include member photos and bios in the Church Life app
- Create a greater number of intergenerational projects and service activities, including those that connect adults of different generations.
- Commission ambassadors to pay attention to first time visitors

Possible implementers include Board of Community Life and staff.

2. Growth in personal spiritual development

Spiritual growth and development are among the primary desires of churchgoers and seekers, and recently Plymouth has taken this path with greater energy. The GTF sees this area of growth and change as another ongoing high priority for the sustained vibrancy of our congregation. The more Plymouth is able to discern and fulfill yearnings for spiritual growth, the more people will be drawn to our congregation.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Promote opportunities for interfaith education, worship, and fellowship.
- Create a "Plymouth Academy" or "Confirmation for All Adults" program on spirituality, taught by members of the church
- Open the labyrinth to the public on a regular schedule

Possible implementers include the Board of Spiritual Formation, ministers and staff.

3. Growth in use of our physical space and assets

While our building is not the church, it is the vessel from which much of our work pours forth. We have a fantastic location and top-notch facilities which make our physical space an important vehicle for growth of all kinds. We need to challenge ourselves, however, about how we think about and use these physical assets to make maximum use of them to further our purposes now and into the future.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Transform Jones Commons into a friendly "coffee shop" for the neighborhood

- Create a collaborative meeting/working space at Plymouth for working professionals who wish to incorporate spirituality and fellowship into their careers
- Work with the Radical Hospitality Committee to create a safe day center space in the basement for persons who need special attention
- Start an Artist in Residence Program

Possible implementers include Board of Finance and Administration, particularly the Buildings and Grounds Committee, the Board of Fine Arts, and staff.

4. Growth in communication within

To achieve growth in community and fellowship within, the objective of Growth Area 1, we must be effective at communicating with and among ourselves. Reaching all with important and relevant information is challenging to say the least. So it is critical that we continue to be creative in expanding and enhancing the ways in which we communicate internally.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Develop a communication plan that makes more use of broad digital and social media platforms including such tools as video.
- Create and make easily available a central resource or “catalogue” that lists the full range of activities Plymouth offers as well as a section that includes such things as a primer on how our governance system works.
- Improve the signage inside our building(s)

Possible implementers include Communications Committee and staff.

5. Growth in social justice efforts

Social justice is part of our DNA as a congregation, and conditions in today’s world provide as many if not more reasons to redouble our commitment to social justice. Our current focus on racial justice is one important new area of growth for us; that effort, among others, will continue to involve members and, potentially, attract new people to Plymouth activities and, perhaps, to worship services.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Encourage and expect all members to be involved with one of the church’s many causes, or as they are able, to volunteer with one of the many organizations we support
- Host podcasts about our experiences on our journey toward racial justice
- Continue to make our physical space available to neighborhood groups and nonprofit organizations

Possible implementers include Board of Outreach committee and Racial Justice Initiative.

6. Growth in radical hospitality and service

Plymouth’s long history includes service to others, and, indeed, we try to emulate the radical love of Jesus. Service to others has been and continues to be an important reason for involvement with Plymouth, so new and even more impactful ways to serve will further strengthen participation and help us live our purposes.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Consider hosting National Night Out in our parking lot for the neighborhood
- Consider housing homeless people
- Expand our involvement with Families Moving Forward, and be more vocal about sharing stories about the program to our members via pulpit talks or other means

Possible implementers include Board of Outreach, Racial Justice Initiative and Radical Hospitality Committee.

7. Growth in our worship service

As evidenced by the growing attendance at our first service, the types and styles of worship have a great deal to do with the attractiveness of any congregation. We need to challenge our assumptions about what worship is and be open to new and nontraditional ideas.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Experiment with new times, days of the week, and types of worship services; for example, hold evening vespers with supper from a food truck, and create more special services like Bluegrass Mass to attract visitors
- Incorporate fresh liturgical forms like drumming, dance and colorful banners
- Invite frequent guest preachers from other faith traditions
- Commission new music from local artists in a variety of forms: Hip-Hop, rock and jazz

Possible implementers include Board of Worship, ministers and staff.

8. Growth in name recognition and awareness

Though this area of growth ranks as number eight out of ten, it's important to keep in mind that without some amount of external communication, Plymouth could become the world's best-kept secret. To attract more members, a church must offer something that is perceived as having significant value and it must be visible and known to those it wishes to attract. The GTF has concluded that doing one without the other is unwise. People need to know about us and we need to tell them. *Please see Appendix B: Recommended Marketing Initiatives to Support the Name Recognition and Awareness Growth Area.*

Possible Ideas for Change

- Create a marketing communications committee and direct them to develop a comprehensive external communications plan to be deployed over a number of years. Commit budget dollars to this effort
- Make available for purchase creative Plymouth-branded "swag" such as clothing, Christmas ornaments, decals, yard signs, etc.
- Develop new pamphlets or other media to give to all visitors to our buildings. Participate in the annual Open Door Minneapolis program
- Use Plymouth's legal name—"Plymouth Congregational Church of Minneapolis" to eliminate wide confusion about where we are located

Possible implementers include Deacons, newly formed Marketing Committee and staff.

9. Growth in financial security

Financial security is not a goal of growth efforts; yet, it is a predictable outcome when a congregation is attractive to and fulfilling for those who participate. Having sufficient financial resources to support the life-giving activities and programs of the congregation is essential, so we ought to seek creative new ideas for ways to solicit offerings and contributions. The ideas below are meant to inspire other innovative ways of thinking about how to increase opportunities for members and others to support the congregation.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Evaluate new business models for funding and operating the congregation; benchmark best practices from businesses and nonprofits to inspire our thinking.
- Move from pledging to annual sustaining member campaigns
- Raise consciousness to cultivate a mindset of giving as a spiritual practice
- Invite designated pledges for special initiatives

Possible implementers include Board of Finance and Administration, the Stewardship Committee, ministers and staff.

10. Growth in connection with our neighborhood

Anything that makes church participation more convenient and more attractive to members and potential members will increase participation. The impact of proximity to the building is not to be overlooked or underestimated. For this reason, the GTF recognizes that outreach to downtown residents should be part of our marketing communication plan. In addition, efforts must be made to strongly encourage members to invite friends and regular visitors to become members.

Possible Ideas for Change

- Do mailings about Plymouth and our special events to the residents of the many new condo and townhome developments in our neighborhood and downtown Minneapolis
- Pay attention to neighborhood events where we can publicize or advertise.
- Explore non-traditional pop-up events such as blood drives, flu shots, games nights, block parties

Possible implementers include everyone!

Conclusion and One Final Recommendation

Growth is not dependent on one particular area of church life or on the efforts of the same small groups of people. Rather, growth depends on all of us, individually and as members of boards and committees. It requires us to open our hearts and minds to change, to new ways of being and doing in the service of living our purposes in today's world and into the future.

We on the Growth Task Force humbly submit this report in the hope that it will inspire all who care about Plymouth to go far beyond the recommendations and ideas presented here. To that end, our final recommendation is that Plymouth institute a regular series of idea generation activities similar to crowd sourcing or the charrettes often used by communities to involve large number of people in visioning and planning. In this way, the entire congregation would have the opportunity to engage in the expansive thinking required to enable us as a congregation to fully embody our purposes and become more of what we are called to be.

Growth Task Force Members

Chris Bohnhoff
Carol Brandenburg
John Cairns
Beverly Gores
Kelly Hugunin
Jay Matre
Lynn Moline, Chair

Bill Read
Theresa Voss
Steve Wellvang
Nicki Zeidner
Paula Northwood
Daniel Wolpert

Appendix A

GROWTH TASK FORCE

Suggested Accountability and Progress Indicators

The best ideas are merely dreams if they are not transformed into action that creates progress. In the hope that the ideas presented in the Growth Task Force (GTF) report are translated into action, the GTF submits this document to the Leadership Council to assist with assigning accountability for certain actions and for adopting and using a set of relevant, meaningful progress indicators for tracking, measuring, and confirming whether actions taken are producing the intended results.

The suggestions presented here are just that; however, the GTF strongly encourages the Leadership Council and Board Chairs to:

- 1.) Assign specific accountability for various growth activities to boards, groups, and individuals as appropriate.
- 2.) Adopt one or more relevant, meaningful, practical indicators of progress for each assigned activity.
- 3.) Report and review the indicators regularly and rigorously, and use them to guide decisions about whether and/or how to continue with certain activities.

Progress indicators need not be perfect nor elaborate, but they must be useful for clarifying what outcomes are expected and then for gauging whether those outcomes are being realized. In that way, actions that are working well can be continued and those that are less productive can be retired or modified. Eventually, the Leadership Council, with help of staff, may develop a “dashboard” of key indicators of growth at Plymouth.

Note: Feel free to call on the Growth Task Force for assistance with indicators; several members have professional backgrounds and expertise in the field.

Possible Accountability Assignments and Progress Indicators

1. Growth in community and fellowship within

- % of members who participate in fellowship groups
- % of members who are active annually in at least one activity or group other than worship and giving
- % of members who respond favorably to questions in periodic congregational survey about feeling of belonging
- Growth in number of people who participate in various programs, tracked over time

Possible implementers include Board of Community Life and staff.

2. Growth in personal spiritual development

- Number of programs
- Growth in number of people who participate in spiritual development programs

Possible implementers include the Board of Spiritual Formation, ministers and staff.

3. Growth in use of our physical space and assets

- Number of days per week our building is used for *mission-related* activities

Possible implementers include Board of Finance and Administration, particularly the Buildings and Grounds Committee, the Board of Fine Arts, and staff.

4. Growth in communication within

- Accomplishment of specific tasks outlined in a well-conceived internal communications plan
- % of members who respond favorably to questions in periodic congregational survey about their perceptions of how well Plymouth keeps them informed

Possible implementers include Communications Committee and staff.

5. Growth in social justice efforts

- % of members who actively participate in social justice causes at Plymouth
- Number of social justice community groups that use our building

Possible implementers include Board of Outreach committee and Racial Justice Initiative.

6. Growth in radical hospitality and service

- Number and kinds of hospitality programs we sponsor and how many people they impact.
- Number of members who participate in these programs and events
- Number of non-members who participate with us

Possible implementers include Board of Outreach, Racial Justice Initiative, and Radical Hospitality Committee.

7. Growth in our worship service

- Number of times and ways we experiment with changes in worship times, days, styles
- Growth in total number of people who attend any and all services in any week

Possible implementers include Board of Worship, ministers and staff.

8. Growth in name recognition and awareness

- Creation and implementation of a marketing communications program

Possible implementers include newly formed Marketing Committee and staff.

9. Growth in financial security

- Completion of several experiments with new or enhanced ways to raise funds/encourage giving
- Measure of dollars received

Possible implementers include Board of Finance and Administration, the Stewardship Committee, ministers and staff.

10. Growth in connection with our neighborhood

(Many metrics for this area may be incorporated in the marketing communications area.)

- Number of programs and activities we sponsor annually to serve the neighborhood
- How many people participate in the above

Possible implementers include everyone!

*If you have questions, these Growth Task Force members are available:
Lynn Moline, John Cairns, Jay Matre and Steve Wellvang.*

Appendix B
GROWTH TASK FORCE

Recommended Marketing Structure & Initiatives to Support the Name Recognition and Awareness Growth Area

In order for growth to occur in name recognition and awareness of Plymouth, the Growth Task Force recommends developing and implementing a thoughtful, comprehensive, multi-year marketing communications plan. This growth objective is grounded in the Growth Task Force's conclusion that a significant number of people in the Metro area would participate in our work and ministries and perhaps join if they were aware of Plymouth.

Recommended Steps

Build a Marketing Communications Committee

1. Tap into collective marketing experience at Plymouth to build and support **Plymouth Marketing Communications Plan**. Recruit a variety of marketing-specific skill sets to optimize current efforts, introduce new marketing efforts, and support execution.
2. Develop and execute against a new charter for the Marketing Communications Committee to include items like:
 - a. Leaning into digital marketing tools and tactics. Prioritize marketing activity that modernizes how we communicate within our church and outside of our church.
 - b. Ensure all members understand Plymouth Communication channels that exist today and drive engagement and connection via these channels.
 - c. Measure marketing efforts and progress.

Develop a Marketing Communications Plan

1. **Define our target audience**: Identify demographic groups whom we believe are the most likely to be interested in our work and our mission. Possible target groups:
 - Inactive members
 - Friends of existing members
 - People living in a specified radius around Plymouth including "empty nesters" and young professionals who have recently become residents of downtown Minneapolis (new developments)
 - Families with children
 - Capture all visitors to Plymouth with 'return messaging' (IE, new visitors via theater programs)
2. **Build our "brand" for messaging purposes**, relying at least in part on work already done in that regard at Plymouth. Messaging tells what we are, why people should care, where we are, how to engage, what to expect, etc.

Some examples of messaging ideas that might be incorporated:

 - Emphasize that we are in Minneapolis, not Plymouth, i.e., use our full, legal name, Plymouth Congregational Church of Minneapolis.
 - Highlight social justice and progressive Christianity in attention-getting terms.

- Use and advertise attention-getting titles for Sunday sermons.
 - Use language that removes potential barriers for people who consider themselves “spiritual” but not religious, e.g., refer to “gathering times” vs “service times”
 - Use descriptive, even edgy slogans and signage to gain attention, e.g., “A Spiritual Home for the “Nones” or “A Spiritual Home for Progressive Christians”
 - Use our own amazing stories in our messages--Plymouth's journey, where it's going, comments on current topics, editorial exposure--similar to Vote No and homeless efforts, Plymouth's legacy and history, etc.
3. Develop and deploy a coherent, practical communication campaign over a period of years for communicating our “brand message” to our “target audiences.” Such a plan would include specific messages to be directed toward specific audiences at selected times using smart media choices. It is assumed that such a plan would make intelligent use of relevant, modern marketing and communication platforms for content delivery.

It may be advisable to retain the services—pro bono or compensated—of a marketing expert to guide and assist.

Ideas and Possible Tactics

Those who develop and implement the Marketing Communications Plan may wish to select from these and other creative ideas for a contemporary, effective marketing communications campaign:

- Form focus groups of existing or potential members for surfacing and evaluating new ideas. Form **beta testing group** of existing members for testing new ideas, concepts, etc.
- Submit event notices to social and traditional media outlets to publicize our Adult Forums and other programs.
- Place flyers in pew during events so visitors are aware of all activities at Plymouth. Create and make **promotional materials** readily available at every activity Plymouth offers on and off-site.
- Place **ads** on buses and bus stops in downtown Minneapolis, new condos, grocery stores, freeway billboards, etc. (evaluate in context of comprehensive marketing plan)
- Offer **promotional gear** that people can purchase to show their Plymouth pride, drives awareness of Plymouth church in daily lives and where our congregants live (e.g., shirts, mugs, hats, bumper stickers, window clings, pens, yard signs, and good quality t-shirts and jackets with catchy phrases and slogans)
- Hold “**pop-up**” **events** that are untraditional for Plymouth but might drive traffic and awareness, e.g., blood drives, flu shots, tech support days, digital equipment recycling collections, participate in Open Doors Minneapolis, etc.
- Increase our use of **digital media** to expand the reach and attractiveness of our messaging—podcasts, Vimeo, online communities, radio broadcasting of our sermons, etc.
- Dedicated **Bring a Friend program**. To a special service or when there is a new art exhibition opening in the Gallery immediately after the service, or to a 10:00 Forum that is of particular interest to that person, then stay for the 11:00 service, etc.