

First Presbyterian Church in Pitman
10 Wildwood Avenue, Pitman, NJ

Mission Study
April 2016



God's Open House
In the name of the Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit
we welcome everyone, we care for each other
and we help people in need.

OUR CHURCH HISTORY

In the spring of 1923 an ad was placed in the local newspaper announcing a meeting at the local Itaska Building for all who were interested in starting a Presbyterian Church in Pitman. On June 24th, 1923, the First Presbyterian Church in Pitman was formed with 99 charter members. Our Sunday School was organized that fall, and the need for a church building led to the purchase of 10 lots. The construction of the sanctuary building, including the Social Hall and Memorial Lounge, was initiated in 1925. Memories of our beginning as a church are reflected in generously donated gifts including the bell in the church tower, the original 1930 Estey Pipe Organ, pulpit furniture, and beautiful stained glass windows. In 1949 the Manse was built next to the church building, and ten years later the education building was added.

Our church celebrated its 75th Anniversary in 1998 with a publication of memories and history, and it celebrated its 90th Anniversary in 2013 with a huge party after worship in the newly renovated Social Hall. A quilt was designed and hand-sewn by a member who is a master quilter; each square represents a different activity or outreach important in our history, and squares and symbols significant in our faith. The quilt is hanging in the Narthex as a visual representation of our faith and our church family.

Under the guidance and leadership of Pastor Patti V. Weikart since 2007, the congregation grew in faith and service, dealing with building renovations, increasing mission projects, and discovering and using our gifts. We made several upgrades to our church property, including installation of an elevator and a new Wicks pipe organ, opus 6435, which was purchased through donations from the entire congregation. Our social hall and sanctuary were renovated including the sound system. We decided to move our church office back to the main church building and the Manse was torn down. In its place, one of our Eagle Scouts created a meditation garden that includes a prayer pole with prayers written in languages from other nations. In addition to the Session and Board of Deacons, the Board of Trustees was established in 2014 to oversee Property, Finance, and Personnel.

Reflections and Highlights

Our remembered history is a precious gift for all ages that is not necessarily captured in the two volumes of recorded history in our church library. Participants in our Mission Study groups shared their favorite memories, many of which are detailed below. One of our current, active members remembers attending services here as a child in the 1930's.

Even though our country was involved in War II in 1940's, nothing stopped the spirit of the first Presbyterian Church in Pitman. During that time the Board of Deacons was formed, a vibrant Youth Choir made its first appearance, and the name of the women's organization was changed from The Loyal Workers to the United Presbyterian Women's Association. The most exciting event of that era was a celebration in which we burned the original 1923 mortgage that was paid off in full in only 17 years.

By the 1950's our church had developed the reputation as "friendly and welcoming", the same words used by members and visitors today. Membership had expanded, requiring two services, and the Christian Education Cornerstone was laid.

One of our members in the 1950's melded her expertise in special education with her love of Jesus Christ, and a new mission was born at First Presbyterian Church in Pitman. Because of her energy and leadership, ARC was allowed use of the Church's Social Hall as an education site for mentally challenged adults and children. At a time when every public school in Gloucester County refused to accept any person with Special Needs, our church provided a much needed location for this important work. Moreover, Sunday School classes were also available for these students. Our church's reputation expanded from "friendly and welcoming" to "accepting all of God's children" as followers of the teachings of Christ, Our Lord and Savior.

The 1960's were a time of turmoil nationally with the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and his brother Senator Robert Kennedy. There was civil unrest due to racial tensions and inequality; The Rev. Martin Luther King was the voice and spirit of peaceful resolution. Members of this church led by Pastor Rutgers, marched in a peaceful demonstration in Washington, D.C., once again witnessing faith and love for all people regardless of race and/or color.

Through the chaos of the 60's, the First Presbyterian Church in Pitman once again showed their belief in equality with the election of the first woman Elder, Henrietta Roesler, and their faith in the future by building a new education wing. Fellowship was important throughout our history, and during the 1960's we enjoyed annual strawberry festivals on the church lawn and a Church Picnic on Pentecost. We

Presbyterians know how to cook and eat! Although the Church Picnic fell out of favor for a while, it was re-instituted in the mid-2000's and is still held every year.

In the 1970's our mission work expanded to the global level in missions to Honduras. Our congregation supported a Honduran family and several congregation members traveled to Honduras to work alongside their brothers and sisters in Christ mixing cement and carrying cement blocks to build housing and other structures. They ate and enjoyed the hospitality and fellowship of the local people. The difference in language was bridged by their common love of Christ.

By the time our Fiftieth Anniversary arrived, our church had grown in numbers, spirit, and programs. There was strong, active Youth Group, and the Tyler Bell Choir, which is still active today, was formed. Our beautiful stained glass windows were restored, and more young families joined our congregation as we celebrated our Golden Anniversary.

God continued to bless our congregation with opportunities for mission. In the 1980's we reached out to support a Russian family, which we continued to do until 2007 when they came to the U.S. Four members of our church were officers in Habitat for Humanity, which was the origin of our support, both financial and through physical labor, for that organization. Church School enrollment continued to increase, and our beautiful Annual Christmas pageant was "born." Our history is also marked with problems with our building and property. The issue of the leaking roof (due to its unique structure) was noted, and is still an issue today.

Through our history, music has been important, but in the 1990's the music program excelled beyond all previous levels, and now incorporated the Joy Clown Troupe. The Cole Scholarship was established to provide scholarships to several deserving high school seniors every year. We joyously celebrated our 75th Anniversary with our first Co-Pastors, Bruce and Carolyn Gillette. A very generous financial gift graciously donated by Maurice and Rita Brooks helped our church finance important improvements, including the elevator that gives people access to all three levels in the Christian Education wing and the church.

As we moved into the 21st Century, we cemented our reputation as a mission-oriented congregation and a church that welcomed all, regardless of race, color, abilities, or lifestyle. Our congregation called our first solo female Pastor, The Rev. Patti V. Weikart in 2007. Our members made two mission trips to Waynesburg, PA, to help build homes for Habitat for Humanity; we purchased land in Pitman for the sole purpose of funding a Habitat for Humanity home. In 2009 a project was initiated to fund the building of a well in Africa; our congregation raised \$10,000 in two years

to provide clean, fresh water to 1500 people in a village in Malawi. The Cole Scholarship was expanded to become the Cole-Lacy Scholarship, providing financial support to deserving high school seniors who are members of our congregation or relatives of members.

To provide another level of pastoral care, we established a Stephen Ministry that gives those in need a quiet listening ear. The renovations that we made to our Social Hall four years ago allow us to have a more “home-like” environment for our guests when we host the Family Promise/Interfaith Hospitality Network.

In 2014 we celebrated our 90th Anniversary with a huge party in the Social Hall after a standing room only worship service. This milestone is commemorated with a hand-stitched quilt celebrating our music, missions, and all that demonstrates our love of Jesus Christ.

We have also been refreshed by renovations in our Sanctuary, including the donation of a solid oak, boat-shaped altar table given in memory of a beautiful woman who lived Christ’s message every day.

We are a church family that enjoys fellowship and laughter. On the 4th of July our church lawn is the premier spot to view the 5k race and the parade. Our members hand out water to the runners and serve free ice cream cones to the spectators. We love the miles of smiles from the people that we serve.

For ninety -two years the First Presbyterian Church of Pitman has tried to follow Christ’s examples in many new and exciting ways by remembering the words of Saint Francis of Assisi:

“Preach the Gospel every day. When necessary, use words.”

Our Current Path

Early in 2015, Pastor Weikart announced her intention to retire in June 2016. Under the guidance of an interim consultant, the Session formed a Mission Study Team that was convened in Sept 2015. The MS Team selected the Congregational Life Survey, which was received in November 2015. One hundred and sixty (160) people filled out the survey, and the MS Team used the results of the survey and a demographic study from MissionInsite as a basis for study group discussions. Four Mission Study Groups (approximately 60 people) met on Sunday or a weekday for six weeks to discuss and review our history, identity, ministry mission, and the future of our church. The information and discussion that follows is the result of this process. Our congregation prayed and opened their hearts and minds to discern God's plan for First Presbyterian Church in Pitman. We don't know exactly what the future holds for us, but we put our trust in God, our Heavenly Father, that He will open our eyes and focus our minds to work and love in His name.

Our Community

Although our church is located in the town of Pitman, New Jersey, our congregation includes members from Pitman and its neighboring communities. To provide a fresh understanding of our community beyond our church walls, we gathered demographic information using the demographic report from MissionInsite. The demographic study gives us a current understanding of our community and helps answer the question, "Where does our congregation fit into the big picture of our community?" We defined our community as the 7.5 mile radius surrounding the church since the majority of our members live within that area.

Within the 7.5 mile radius of our church:

- The population, households and family households in the study group area are projected to increase by 2% over the next ten years. Married couple families are found in 74.1% of the study group population, Single mother families are 18.8% of the population and single father families are found in 7.1% of the population. These results were reflective of state averages.
- The age forecast reflects change in the community. The population is aging as a consequence of the Baby Boom generation and the decline in live births in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In our community, overall the average age now is 37, and in ten years will be 40. Children ages zero to 17 will decline slightly in five years, but is projected to climb again, slightly, in ten years. Four age groups are reported to increase over the next ten years: 0 to 4 age (0.5%), 25 to 34 (1.9%), 55 to 64 (0.2%), and the largest increase in the age group 65 & over (5.8%). Three age groups are projected to decline: 5 to 17 (-1.1%), 18 to 24 (-1.6%), and 35 to 54 (-4.7%).
- Education levels of adults 18 years or older exceed the state average for high school graduates, some college credits, and associate degrees; however, our community is below the state average for bachelor, graduate and professional degrees.
- Our community consists of 69.8% white collar workers and 30.9% blue collar workers.

- The racial and ethnic make-up of our community is 79.2% White, 11% African American, 4.9% Hispanic, 3.1% Asian, and 1.9% Pacific Island, American Indian, & other. These percentages are not projected to change over the next ten years.

- Financial resources are an indicator of community opportunity or distress. Three variables are presented in this category: Household Income, Family Income and Poverty. Our community is slightly below the state average in Household income trends, but the income level will increase proportionately with the state average over the next ten years. The poverty level in our community is 5%. This is below the state average of 8.5%.

- The level of religious affiliation of the population within the 7.5 mile radius of our church is described as somewhat low, but is reflective of the state averages.

❖ Consider myself a spiritual person	49.7%
❖ Conservative Evangelical Christian	36.5%
❖ Important to Attend Religious Services	20.9%
❖ Enjoy watching religious TV Programs	18.4%
❖ My faith is really important to me	17.1%

Our Congregation

Who We Are

First Presbyterian Church in Pitman is a friendly, welcoming church where once entered “a feeling of home prevails”. Ask anyone in our congregation how we describe ourselves, and you will hear the words: *inclusive, generous, friendly, active, musical, mission-minded, pro-active, caring, and enthusiastic.*

Our official rolls indicate 275 members, but we count approximately 450 people who are associated and participate regularly in church activities. Statistically we have a similar age profile to many churches with our membership more heavily weighted at the more mature end of the spectrum than toward youth. Approximately 48% are 65+ years old, and 36% are 45-64 years old. The young adults (25-44yr. old) account for 13% and the 15-24 year olds make up 4% of our congregation. Our congregation is 97% white, which is somewhat higher than the demographic measurement of 79.2% white within the 7.5 mile radius of our church in which 94% of our members live. Approximately 66% of our congregation is married, and 59% have an income level of \$75,000 or more.

Our congregation has a higher level of education than the area or the state averages. Our survey results show that more than 49% of the congregation has a college degree and 22% have advanced degrees beyond a B.S. /B.A. The level of education and variety of professions provides an exciting atmosphere for preaching and teaching.

Being inclusive is written in our hearts, our faces, and our actions. When our congregation members were asked what they value in our church, the overwhelming response was “the love and support of each other regardless of race, ethnicity, abilities, or sexual orientation.” Several of our members stated that after visiting several churches, they made our church their home because our congregation openly accepted and supported their children who have special needs. We care for each other and treasure each member and friend of our church family. We also enjoy and appreciate that within our congregation while people hold different opinions about critical issues; there is no animosity between individuals or groups.

We enjoy preaching that challenges us and our mindset, encourages us to explore our faith, and propels us to take loving action in God's world. For the past nine years we have been blessed with a Pastor whose Biblically-based sermons are relevant, timely, and instructional for the difficult challenges that we face daily in our lives and in the world. In the congregational survey, about 76% of the participants stated that they experienced God's presence during worship, and 51% reported that worship services and other congregational activities help them to a great extent with everyday life. Our results were on par with results from the 2011 (most recent) averages for fast-growing Presbyterian Churches.

We are blessed with our Board of Deacons and Presbyterian Women and many individuals who support congregation members and families in times of need. Our Stephens Ministry and Hospital Visitation Group provide caring support during challenging times. Presbyterian Women knit baby caps to welcome every baby that is baptized in our sanctuary and prayer shawls that the pastor delivers during pastoral care visits.

We are fortunate to have a vibrant and growing group of children who attend Sunday School taught by teachers whom the children love. Our current Confirmation Class shared that either their parents or their grandparents brought them initially to this Church. They feel very welcome, and appreciate being part of the Worship Service as acolytes, ringing the Sunday bell, and acting as lay readers. Several commented that being able to understand the sermons is a large part of why they attend. Our youth participate in the Sunshine Singers, the Joy Clown Troupe, Youth Group, Family First Sundays, and the Best Christmas Pageant Ever, written by a congregation member, which is our 7:00 pm Christmas Eve Service. Every summer we offer a themed Vacation Bible School that is open to all children in the community. The children in our congregation participate in and often initiate mission projects such as the Angel Tree for the Camden Animal Shelter, mission trips from Maine to West Virginia, retreats at Sea Isle, NJ, and have represented our congregation at the Triennial at Purdue University, Indiana.

We support local missions like the Pitman Food Pantry that at one time was housed on our property. When our social hall was renovated three years ago, our church was finally able to host guests from the Interfaith Hospitality Network/Family Promise, even though we had participated in the program in various ways in the preceding years. Our congregation members are very "hands on" in many mission projects. Our church is the first and only church in Gloucester County to finance the complete building of a Habitat House which is located on Boulevard Avenue in Pitman. Some of the other local/regional missions that we support include Urban Promise, Camp Johnsonburg, and Jean Webster's Kitchen in Atlantic City.

In the global area we participate in many ongoing missions such as the Heifer Project and the Blanket Fund. In 2009 we initiated a project to fund the building of a well in Africa. Our congregation planned to raise the money over a four year period, but raised the required \$10,000 in only two years. The well was dedicated in January 2012, to provide a fresh water supply to a village in Malawi.

Our Strengths

Our strength, first and foremost, is that the First Presbyterian Church in Pitman is God's Open House. We have a history of being inclusive and taking a stand for equal rights for all. We welcome all who want to join, visit, or need a "stopping off" place for a while.

Our congregation is very mission-oriented, a strength that our members value. Many members have stated that our focus and involvement in mission was a contributing factor to visiting and subsequently joining our church, and this strength continues to attract new people.

Our music program, with its depth of talent, is most definitely one of our strengths. We enjoy a variety of music from our Sanctuary Choir (adult), Sunshine Singers (youth), Tyler Bell Choir, and the Impossible Ringers, in addition to musical offerings from congregation members. Our Joy Clown Troupe uniquely combines music and clowning to deliver Christian messages and sermons. Although traditional music has always been a major focus for our worship experience, we also enjoy music from other cultures and contemporary hymns. For more than 20 years, we have held a Jazz Vespers service, currently every other month, on Sunday evenings that draws members from our church and other local communities.

Our Needs

Although our congregation feels that their needs are being met by our worship service, the study groups readily identified two weaknesses in our worship life that we need to remedy. We are hungry for adult Christian education on an ongoing basis that would be led by the pastor or members of the congregation, and not necessarily limited to adult Sunday School. Of the thirteen key areas derived from our study groups, establishing a plan for adult Christian education was one of the top five.

We have a desire for more understanding and training in personal prayer and daily devotions to increase our personal connection with God. In the survey, about 34% of our congregation spends time daily in prayer, meditation, or reading the Bible alone, which is significantly lower than the national average of 46%. Many of us participated in a Lenten series on centering prayer in 2015, but most have not continued the practice. We need help in developing daily devotions and in establishing the habit of daily prayer.

Although more than half of our members have served in leadership roles, we find that the same core group of people takes on the largest portion of responsibilities. The survey showed that we have a lower than average level of participation from our members. One of our top five priorities addresses the need to encourage all members to explore and use their gifts.

While we have a vibrant Youth Christian Education program, our dream is that it will grow to a level for which we will need a Youth Minister. Our Future Statement for Youth Christian Education is the first step to take advantage of current technology and start to grow participation.

In our Future Statements and First Steps, we felt a need to build on at least one of our strengths, because there is always room for improvement. Of the 13 key areas, *inclusiveness* was voted as one of the top five across the study groups. A new member pointed out several ways to improve the new member orientation, and social events were proposed by all of the study groups.

Our Future

The First Presbyterian Church in Pitman is an intelligent and compassionate congregation energized by new plans to do the work that Jesus Christ has planned for us

After reflecting on our history, identity, and envisioning a future without limitations, we identified 13 key areas that make up the core of our ministry:

Inclusive of different lifestyles, abilities, etc.

Growth, prayer, personal devotion

Increase member participation

Embracing new people/Hospitality

Technology in worship & outreach

Increase openness to racial/ethnic diversity

Family Ministries

Youth Christian Education

Adult Education Opportunities

Worship and Music

Global/Local Missions

Fellowship

Campus Ministries

After prayerful consideration of the demographic study results, the member survey, and ideas generated, discussed, and supported in the Mission Study groups, with God's help and grace, our congregation will focus on the five key areas for future development that are bolded above.

Our Future Statements and the Starting Points to Realize Our Future

Inclusiveness

The First Presbyterian Church in Pitman will continue to be an open church, welcoming and accepting all of God's children into our church family regardless of abilities, lifestyles, ethnicity, or backgrounds.

First Step: Shepherd new members and establish social and fellowship activities for families.

Prayer/Personal Devotion

Our congregation is committed to an active prayer life for all of our members. The purpose is to increase our connection with our Savior and to be open to the Holy Spirit for direction, so that we are a loving force not only for our individual communities, but throughout the world.

First Step: Develop weekly prayer themes to focus us on prayer, and commit to setting aside a specific time for individual prayer each week.

Youth Christian Education

Our congregation is committed to our Youth Christian Education Program as it expands to a strong, growing and vibrant part of the body of Christ, not only here in Pitman, but in the world.

First Step: Establish spiritual education resources on our website that are available to our youth and their families.

Increase Member Participation

We are committed to fostering an excited and engaged congregation where each member has found their passion and spiritual gift. We use these gifts to do God’s work in the world.

First Step: Establish classes to identify our spiritual gifts.

Adult Christian Education

We are committed to a deeper understanding of our Lord’s grace through adult education opportunities to study scripture and other topics that will help us grow in faith and discern God’s path for us.

First Step: Establish small study groups for adults on Sunday or during the week for Bible study or other topics of interest.

Additional Hopes and Dreams

For Our Future

- As a congregation committed to letting the Lord into our lives, we learn the skills of praying by listening and praying, then we practice praying by participating in prayer chains, prayer partners, prayer groups, individual prayers and prayer vigils.
- Prior to the Advent or Lenten season, we contribute a daily reading and prayer entry for our church Advent or Lenten Daily Devotional. A special Advent or Lenten calendar will be written for our children to use during these seasons to provide fun activities for our children to practice prayer as well as to contribute to missions such as One Great Hour of Sharing.
- Display personal devotions in our Social Hall
- Adopt “manors” for special prayer and visiting.
- We allow all members willing to serve to have leadership roles and membership on our committees.
- Our social activities are advertised as open for all members to attend.
- Every other month, we focus a potluck dinner on a different ethnic group. Members enjoy learning how to create new foods and learn about the culture.
- Images of our church family and special events hosted by our church dedicated to inclusiveness are displayed in our church, in the Cornerstone, and on our website to show our inclusiveness without the need for words. This information can be forwarded to family and friends as an invitation to join us.
- Our church organizes church activities that will give respite care for parents/caregivers of special needs children or adults. This includes providing support in Sunday school so that parents can attend church.
- Educational programs that focus on our commonalities are planned with other religious organizations.

- Our church encourages members to make connections with each other by photographing new members and posting their pictures, names and key facts about the members. Our church directory also includes interesting facts about each member describing hobbies, professions, and/or family ties.
- Under the guidance of our full-time Youth Minister, we build a spiritual foundation for our youth's future.
- Our Sunday school is meeting the needs of our teachers by including teacher rotations, so that they have an opportunity to attend church services twice a month.
- Our vibrant youth groups enjoy fellowship both within our church family and alongside our fellow neighboring congregations.
- Our Youth Minister leads our youth and their families in Spiritual Retreats and other family- oriented activities throughout the week and calendar year.
- Our congregation enjoys varied forms of worship; including formal, informal, hands-on worship where all can participate, and open times for prayer and meditation.
- We increase our member participation by breaking member participation responsibilities into smaller segments of time or commitment.
- Our members enjoy the fellowship of Informal educational social activities including field trips to special museum exhibits.
- Since participating in a Lenten Series to study Centering Prayer, we are eager to establish a group to learn to practice Centering Prayer on a regular basis.
- We will use our church webpage for more than a calendar and include videos, streaming, and a blog.