

[On Saturday, January 9] your session met for our annual retreat. It was a day that many of us had been facing with some apprehension, having been tasked with the prayerful consideration and discussion of the New Beginnings Small Group Facilitators' report and the recommendations for our future that will emerge from it. We have also been undertaking an evaluation of the Sunday morning breakfast due to increasing concerns for the security of our congregation, and exploring options that will allow us to provide for the safety and security of all who enter our space, regardless of the type of nourishment they seek. We opened the day with a thoughtful worship service led by Pastor Mike that centered us and put us in position to prayerfully consider the tasks ahead. After today, I can state without reservation that I could not ask for a better group of people to lead our congregation, and I can honestly say that, personally, the hope and optimism of the New Beginnings Facilitator's report has given me a renewed commitment to the Downtown Presbyterian Church.

The New Beginnings process is designed to discern both short and long-term goals. It is important to acknowledge that this is an ongoing process, not a quick fix. We have over two hundred years of ministry on this corner, and we must recognize that decisions made in haste may not be healthy for us, and that long-range planning is essential for our growth and success.

We have identified several things that we can do immediately to address the need to center the spiritual care and growth of our congregation and community. In addition, our plan is to provide a definitive timeline for long-term goals after our session meeting later this month.

We recognize that while the portion of our worship service that addresses the concerns and prayers of our people is a very meaningful and vital part of the service for many, it is not always the best way for your Session to identify those who are in need of immediate pastoral care. We will be providing prayer cards in the pews for anyone who wishes to be lifted up in prayer. We recognize that many people prefer their needs to be addressed privately. Anyone filling out a prayer card will be able to indicate if they wish to be recognized in corporate prayer, included in the E-votion, contacted by a member of the Session, or have their need addressed privately by Pastor Mike Wilson.

We recognize that while the foundation of every congregation is based on our coming together on Sunday morning to worship God and enter our week with a renewed spirit, there are many other ways to gather in fellowship and grow meaningful relationships. Based on that, we would like to ask for ideas for small groups. Whether it's a book club, a women's bible study, a men's meditation group, or a liturgical dance group, we want to facilitate your fellowship. Please email your ideas to me at (email address to be added) Our goal is to provide people with opportunities to connect outside of Sunday morning.

We are committed to integrating new members of our congregation in a thoughtful and nurturing way. Going forward, we are going to partner our new members with a ruling elder for support and connection to our church family. Please let me know if you are a ruling elder in our congregation who would like to participate. We have quite a few new members who could benefit from your guidance!

Sunday Morning Breakfast

This, in many ways, was the most difficult part of our day for me personally. As many of you know my “day job” is Gastroenterology Nurse Practitioner at Nashville General Hospital at Meharry, and I interact with Nashville’s homeless and urban poor on a daily basis. As stated in the Session Notes in our E-votion, Matthew 25:40 says “And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” We as a congregation have long been known for our commitment to providing both physical and spiritual nourishment to our sisters and brothers who are truly “the least of these.” Our Wednesday lunch was founded in the 1980s under the guidance of Rev. Pat McGeachy, and continues today as an outreach overseen by our Pastor, our building manager Paulino Jarquin, and a core group of regular volunteers.

There are not enough words to express our gratitude to Jim Barr for his extraordinary and dedicated work over the past 13 years as the Sunday morning breakfast evolved from merely handing out donuts to a network of dedicated volunteers who gather on Sunday morning to prepare and serve a meal to our homeless and urban poor guests.

We did not undertake the evaluation of the Sunday breakfast lightly; indeed, the decisions we made are probably among the most difficult any session has faced. After very prayerful and heartfelt conversation, we decided that Sunday March 27th will be the final Sunday breakfast. And as of January 24th, the breakfast will be moved from 8:30 to 8:00 am to allow for an additional 30 minutes to assure that the building is clean and secure.

We are simultaneously pursuing alternatives that would include partnering with well-established non-profit organizations to provide a Saturday morning meal, which would still fill a weekend void in feeding the homeless and urban poor. It is very important that our congregation know that our commitment to serving “the least of these” has not changed.

We remain committed to being a downtown ministry, and we recognize that, as downtown Nashville grows and evolves, we much change with it. We feel it is necessary to redefine our

Sunday morning efforts to continue as a vital center for an active congregation and pursue other ministry opportunities, including opportunities for other congregations and community groups to participate.

In the 12 weeks between today and March 27th, we will be working diligently on an alternative ministry to take place on Saturday morning. If a viable alternative is not immediately available, we will turn our attention to other ways in which we can apply our considerable talents to ministering to Nashville's homeless and urban poor, while maintaining our commitment to the spiritual care and growth of our congregation.

We thank you for your continued prayers and support as we strive to serve our congregation and our community in spreading the gospel of Jesus Christ,

Betsy Bahn

Clerk of Session, on behalf of the session of the Downtown Presbyterian Church