

***Connecting for Faithful Presence***  
**A Next Steps Action Plan for Eastern Avenue CRC**  
**(June, 2010)**

**Congregational Vision:** *As witnesses to the redeeming gospel of Jesus Christ, Eastern Avenue is an inclusive and growing community of life-long disciples that engages the gifts of all her members in vibrant and transformative ministry as she honors her call to be Christ's body in the neighborhood, the community and the world.*

**Congregational Mission:** *to focus our energies and efforts in four primary areas: 1) strengthening a communal relationship with God, 2) instilling in children and youth a love for God and God's church, 3) incorporating all worshipers into the life of the church for daily encouragement on the journey of faith, and 4) working with people in the surrounding community for social justice and mutual transformation.*

**A Summary of the Discovery/Planning Process:**

*In the Spring of 2008, the council approved a strategic planning initiative rooted in a discovery process that included extensive listening to community stakeholders and congregational members. Over the summer months a strategic planning team was formed and a leader identified. Members included Don Bultman, David Dorner, Dean Gunnink, Grace Joldersma, Thea Leunk, Kristen Moore, Victoria Sluga, and Fred Sterenberg, with Dean designated team leader and Wayne Squires from Volunteers In Service providing coaching/consulting assistance. The first meeting was held on August 20, 2008 with an understanding that the whole process would take roughly eighteen months. Sharon Breuker and other prayer team members committed to faithful intercession for the work until it was completed.*

*The community listening (or "the look outward") included four neighborhood walks by team members and other Eastern members, over fifty interviews with community stakeholders, and analysis of a ministry area profile that included detailed demographic information, religious preferences, and lifestyle trends. Along the way, twenty-five people were trained for the interview process and helped interpret the feedback. An additional twenty members participated in walking the neighborhood and talking with neighbors and offering key observations. A summary of community discovery was completed in February of 2009 and main findings reported to the congregation in March.*

*The congregational listening (or "look inward") involved a ministry capacity survey filled out by 198 members, personal interviews with nearly 160 members, mapping of congregational assets by the administrative council, and a spiritual gifts assessment of over 80 individuals. Along the way, 40 people were trained to conduct interviews and assisted in interpreting the feedback. In addition, many leaders contributed to the ongoing discernment process. A summary of congregational discovery was completed in November of 2009 and key insights communicated to the congregation in early January 2010.*

*The strategic planning team created a number of future ministry scenarios in January of 2010 and developed a rough draft action plan in February and March. After interacting with the council in April and getting additional feedback from congregational members in May, a final action plan was composed for congregational approval in June of 2010. What follows is the final version and reflects hundreds of hours of prayerful, creative work by team members.*

## **An Overview of the Action Plan:**

*This comprehensive feedback process confirmed a shared vision and a growing understanding of mission for Eastern Church (see above statements). It also provided patterns of mutual hopes and expectations which became the basis for a detailed action plan. These collective, God-given desires and dreams are reflected in the goals and objectives listed below. The strategies provide specific suggestions and potential ways for meeting the stated goals and objectives (i.e. a roadmap of implementation for staff, council members, and ministry leaders).*

*Three major goals and twelve total objectives can be outlined as follows:*

- 1) **to become more fully known as a disciple-making community of faith** by:
  - increasing intergenerational participation in worship
  - developing more variety within Eastern's Reformed, liturgical framework
  - strengthening relationships among Eastern members and the shepherding influence of identified leaders
  - discerning Eastern's funding and support role in the potential development of two new faith communities on the southeast side of Grand Rapids
  - identifying key markers and habits on the spiritual journey for all disciples of Jesus
  
- 2) **to become more fully known as a faithful, loving neighbor in the Baxter neighborhood and in metropolitan Grand Rapids** by:
  - increasing relational presence in the Baxter neighborhood and nearby southeast side communities
  - strengthening organizational partnerships in the Grand Rapids area for the purpose of transformed lives and neighborhoods
  - deepening passion for justice and sustained advocacy with regard to those living on the social margins in local and global contexts
  - encouraging greater involvement in good neighboring by Eastern members
  - developing the ability and comfort level of each member to share his/her story of faith (which is also connected to the first goal)
  
- 3) **to increase the amount of resources (i.e. time, talent, and finances) for communal discipleship and mission** by:
  - building greater individual and organizational capacity for faithful stewardship and sacrificial giving
  - developing more flexibility in the budgeting process for supporting innovative ministry and mission

*The action plan is intended to be read as an opportunity to continue God's story among his people at Eastern (wherever they live and work) and in the Baxter neighborhood. It is not a strategic rulebook laying out inflexible principles, but rather a series of practical invitations to experience and bear witness to God's goodness and grace. As such, the strategic planning team hopes it will be received with great joy and anticipation. It should be noted that an implementation team of 5-7 members will be formed to discern how and when the identified strategies will be applied and to ensure appropriate follow-up responses.*

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**Goal 1:** *to become more fully known as a disciple-making community of faith*

**Objective 1:** **to increase intergenerational participation in worship and mission**

Strategy 1: to more intentionally design worship gatherings for intergenerational participation and multi-cultural influence

- enhance and highlight the participation of children on a biweekly basis
- create Sunday morning worship festivals on a quarterly basis (i.e. drama, storytelling, extended praise, the Lord's Table, interactive learning)
- provide more monthly opportunities for visible, multi-cultural leadership
- move from an informational/education model of Sunday School to a mentoring/life formation/group model for high school youth and adults; note: *instruction in the catechism will continue to be a high priority in the formation process*
- develop consistent mentoring relationships between skilled musicians, liturgists, artists, and technicians and interested children/youth

Strategy 2: to create more opportunities for intergenerational service and outreach

- work with all committee/ministry leaders to encourage youth (and family) participation and establish an apprenticing structure
- utilize fifth Sundays as a corporate opportunity for community service and neighborhood engagement
- sustain at least one intergenerational short term mission experience per year, perhaps alternating between local and global contexts

Strategy 3: to increase the amount of staff influence and oversight for youth ministries

- restructure current staff/staffing responsibilities to place greater emphasis on youth involvement in spiritual formation, community life, and mission
- boost the staff FTE (i.e. full-time equivalency) from the current 6.125 to 7.0

Strategy 4: to improve communication and coordination among all staff and ministry leaders involved in the overall spiritual formation process

- establish a task force to simplify and integrate the current committee structures; recommendation: establish four core ministry teams under which all work can be done: 1) Spiritual Formation, 2) Community Engagement, 3) Worship, Arts, & Communication Technologies, 4) Operations
- schedule an annual retreat of staff and ministry leaders for team-building, learning, planning, and personal renewal

**Objective 2: to develop more variety within Eastern's Reformed, liturgical framework for gathered worship**

Strategy 1: to introduce and/or increase new worship practices in a manner that both honors historic commitments and encourages personal participation

- incorporate a creative dimension of worship on a monthly basis (e.g. a different order of service, a time of healing prayer, a short drama, an interview, or a rarely used musical style)
- create more spaces for individual involvement, reflection, and response (e.g. extended silence, lectio divina, written prayers, spoken confessions, spontaneous storytelling, or exuberant declarations)

Strategy 2: to remodel the sanctuary so that there is greater opportunity for the visual arts and recent technologies to enhance the communal praise of God and the ongoing invitation to shared mission

- commission a task force to conduct research and make specific recommendations about architectural changes, technological improvements, and associated costs
- gain council and congregational consensus and begin implementing recommendations

**Objective 3: to strengthen relationships among Eastern members and the shepherding influence of identified leaders**

Strategy 1: to consistently equip, encourage, and support elders in their shepherding responsibilities (note: *this basic strategy applies also to deacons*)

- work through the elder's handbook on an annual basis
- schedule an annual elders retreat for prayer, learning, and team-building
- provide hands-on training for member interviews and home visitations at the start of each ministry season
- increase the amount of care district reporting in monthly elders meetings
- identify and train shepherding assistants for each care district

Strategy 2: to deepen the commitment to and experience of communal hospitality

- consistently encourage and challenge all ministry leaders to open their homes for shared meals and team meetings
- plan more "volunteer appreciation" celebrations for all those serving in ministry/mission
- form short term fellowship/hospitality groups of 6-10 people
- increase the number of shared meals associated with ministry teams, small groups, and outreach activities
- create and communicate more opportunities for community groups and organizations to utilize the church campus

Strategy 3: to increase the amount of staff oversight for small groups and community life

- restructure current staff/staffing responsibilities to place greater emphasis on the role of small groups in sustained discipleship and shared mission
- boost the staff FTE (i.e. full-time equivalency) from the current 6.125 to 7.0 [see also goal 1–objective 1–strategy 3]

Strategy 4: to increase the number of mid-level social activities where people can informally connect around common areas of interest and passion

- identify willing leaders of life-stage or hobby groups/clubs (e.g. young moms, empty nesters, golfers, campers, bicyclists, and gardeners) and support them in their efforts to “build community” around these interests
- consider new church-wide events and celebrations (e.g. a church picnic, a beach day, or gender specific retreats)

**Objective 4: to discern Eastern’s funding and support role in the potential development of two new faith communities on the southeast side of Grand Rapids**

Strategy 1: to form a task force to prayerfully consider and perhaps oversee new expressions of church under the leadership of Steve DeRuiter and Gilbert Varela

- identify and recruit key task force members
- establish meeting patterns and key responsibilities
- work closely with key agencies throughout the discernment process
- communicate consistently with council and congregation on important developments

Strategy 2: in the case of the Spirit’s clear direction, to provide people and financial resources (in collaboration with other groups/agencies) in the hope of long term success and sustainability

- create multiple spaces of prayer/discernment for all interested members
- fully invoke Eastern’s systems for decision-making, blessing, support, communication, and willing participation

**Objective 5: to identify key markers and habits on the spiritual journey for all disciples of Jesus (i.e. to develop a clearer understanding of lifelong faith formation)**

Strategy 1: to design a discipleship path for all members to consider, a path that includes shared spiritual practices (e.g. bible study, prayer, solitude, service, stewardship, sharing faith, etc.), spiritual gifts training/assessment, and the presence of spiritual guides and mentors

- identify and recruit key members for a sub-committee/ad hoc task force
- develop a recommended profile/path
- gain council blessing and congregational approval
- provide training and resources for willing mentors

Strategy 2: to adapt current systems to this preferred path (e.g. membership expectations, training/education, small group activities, etc.)

- engage the administrative council and staff members in identifying organizational implications and needed changes
- start making necessary adjustments (e.g. changing bylaws or rewriting curriculum or revising the membership covenant)

***Goal 2: to become more fully known as a faithful, loving neighbor in the Baxter community and in metropolitan Grand Rapids***

**Objective 1: to increase relational presence in the Baxter neighborhood and nearby southeast side communities**

Strategy 1: to work with current outreach ministry teams to identify and take advantage of follow-up relational/friendship opportunities (e.g. the Saturday Food Program and afterschool tutoring)

- clarify staff/council oversight of each community ministry
- provide a template of relational development questions to each community ministry leader to be answered (via reports/updates) on a quarterly basis
- establish twice-a-year celebration-storytelling-brainstorming events for all leaders and workers in outreach ministries
- budget for resources that increase capacity for relational mission (e.g. conferences, curriculum, or sponsored workshops)

Strategy 2: to form a neighborhood walking team to consistently stroll through the parish area, talk with neighbors, observe activities, and pray together

- identify willing leaders/participants
- set up a basic framework and conduct initial training
- initiate walking team activities
- create feedback loops to staff/council members

Strategy 3: to increase staff oversight and focus on parish relationships and community engagement

- restructure current staff/staffing responsibilities to place greater emphasis on relational, sustainable community ministry
- boost the staff FTE (i.e. full-time equivalency) from the current 6.125 to 7.0 [see also goal 1–objective 1–strategy 3 and goal 1–objective 3–strategy 3]

Strategy 4: to consistently encourage/challenge Eastern members about the importance of parish presence and neighborhood involvement

- utilize all communication vehicles for neighborhood participation stories
- form support groups/home gatherings for those living and working in relative proximity to the church campus

Strategy 5: to invite greater utilization of campus space by local groups and organizations and to intentionally function as a community host

- revise building use policies and associated fees
- clarify staff and committee responsibilities connected to expanded facility usage
- see recommendation under goal 1–objective 3–strategy 2

**Objective 2: to strengthen organizational partnerships in the Grand Rapids area for the purpose of transformed lives and neighborhoods**

Strategy 1: to convene a collaborative task force to consider hiring a full-time community organizer/developer (note: potential partners include CRWRC/CFA, Classis Grand Rapids East, Baxter Community Center, Messiah Missionary Baptist Church, Peniel House/Calvin College, True Light Baptist Church, and the Baxter Neighborhood Association)

- confirm key partners
- develop job description, accountability framework, partner responsibilities, and needed funding
- employ and support an experienced community organizer for a minimum of two years

Strategy 2: to form a neighborhood housing improvement task force to determine the viability of a long term, sustainable partnership with ICCF (and/or other organizations) in the Baxter neighborhood

- identify an experienced leader and interested participants
- conduct research and confirm key partners/resources
- make recommendations and gain council approval
- establish partnership agreements and form work teams

Strategy 3: to create a neighborhood business development task force to identify feasible business opportunities and potential funders/partners, especially with regard to a Laundromat, a sit down restaurant, and a fresh food co-op or small grocery store

- identify an experienced leader and interested participants
- reach consensus on the top two initial projects and conduct feasibility studies
- confirm key partners and funders for the most “doable” project and design an initial business plan
- make recommendation(s) and gain council approval
- establish formal partnership agreements and begin business plan implementation related to remodeling/construction

Strategy 4: to initiate and participate in ecumenical worship gatherings and service projects with other willing neighborhood churches

- build upon previous worship experiences and increase leadership cooperation and membership participation
- form a planning team that includes representatives from Eastern, True Light, and other interested churches
- create at least two collaborative events per year, one focused on gathered worship/celebration and one focused on community service

**Objective 3: to deepen passion for justice and sustained advocacy with regard to those living on the social margins in local and global contexts**

Strategy 1: to consistently provide training opportunities for increased awareness and competency in establishing relationships across racial, cultural, and economic boundaries

- schedule an annual trip to the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University
- host and/or support a bi-annual inclusion training event to heighten awareness and skill for participating in a diverse cultural context
- form short term “healing racism” groups with willing neighborhood churches and organizations
- incorporate minimal cultural competency training into expectations for all staff and council leaders

Strategy 2: to create conversational spaces and friendship-building opportunities with those in the gay community for the sake of long term, meaningful participation in the Eastern community of faith

- identify a leader and participants for a dialogical/support ministry
- contact others who are involved in ministries of inclusion and learn from or partner with them as appropriate
- create a “pilot” group/community experience to build relationships and promote experiential learning/awareness for all participants
- enlist the help of the senior pastor and resident theologians to summarize issues-challenges-opportunities related to biblical-theological interpretation in the context of current biological and social science research
- present an inclusion approach/strategy for council and congregational consideration
- engage denominational systems as needed/appropriate

Strategy 3: to further develop and build upon practices of environmental stewardship with a view toward sustainable living in personal, family, congregational, and community contexts

- form an environmental stewardship oversight team to evaluate organizational practices, invite participation in projects and initiatives, and offer needed resources
- encourage the development of support groups for those who want to sustain habits of simplicity and generosity and creation care

Strategy 4: to participate in particular local/regional initiatives related to the restorative justice process (i.e. prisoner reentry)

- identify an experienced leader and interested participants
- discern specific serving/mentoring/advocacy opportunities for Eastern members
- develop a ministry team to get involved in meaningful ways
- provide needed training/resources/encouragement

Strategy 5: to develop and sustain partnerships promoting global engagement through hands-on service, community development, and reallocation of resources

- continue current support and provision for commissioned missionaries and sponsored agencies/organizations
- promote an extensive, bi-annual short term mission experience with identified global partners [see also goal 1–objective 1–strategy 2]
- deepen one or two partnerships with identified global partners through increased resourcing of specific projects and/or increased personal participation of Eastern leaders/members

Strategy 6: to maintain and expand Eastern’s denominational leadership role on the above issues/challenges and any other ongoing social justice concerns

- continue to support the participation of Eastern leaders in denominational ministry initiatives, task forces, study groups, and/or oversight positions
- initiate conversations and engage systems on key areas of consensus at Eastern

**Objective 4: to encourage greater involvement in good neighboring by Eastern members wherever they live and work**

Strategy 1: to design an annual congregational initiative with a “loving God by loving your neighbor” focus that includes a message series, small group learning, creative serving projects, and hospitality opportunities

- start preparation, involving staff and ministry leaders
- finalize core initiatives and administrative details
- initiate this extended congregational spiritual/missional formation event
- assess the event’s success and identify follow-up opportunities

Strategy 2: to support the development of small groups in which members have a geographical affinity and desire for neighborhood involvement

- provide Sunday evening teaching/training/group interaction on the neighborhood as a primary context for spirituality and mission
- develop and update a visual map identifying the places where Eastern members live
- facilitate the formation of house groups focused on neighborhood/community transformation

Strategy 3: to establish a quarterly “be with your neighbor” night (e.g. on fifth Sundays)

- develop detailed proposal
- gain council approval and congregational blessing
- link first “neighbor night” to congregational initiative
- see suggestion under goal 1–objective 1–strategy 2

Strategy 4: to continually affirm the priority of vocational integrity and the spiritual potential of collegial friendships

- identify and tell transformational stories of kingdom influence
- encourage significant involvement in workplace groups, neighborhood associations, community organizations, education boards, etc.

**Objective 5: to develop the ability and comfort level of each member to share his/her story of faith**

Strategy 1: to conduct a relational evangelism training of staff, council, and ministry leaders in an off-site retreat setting

- enlist a skilled, experienced trainer/facilitator for this retreat
- schedule and conduct this training in conjunction with the annual elders retreat
- see recommendation under goal 1–objective 3–strategy 1

Strategy 2: to provide extended “sharing our faith” training for congregational members in a Sunday evening context

- enlist a skilled, experienced trainer/facilitator
- complete training

Strategy 3: to form an evangelism training/coaching team to identify key resources, offer consistent instruction, and mentor individuals and groups in follow-up efforts

- adjust current responsibilities/expectations of the evangelism committee to reflect a greater coaching/training focus
- invite the new/renewed participation of gifted, passionate, willing team members
- ensure consistent interaction and communication with all ministry leaders and teams

**Goal 3: to increase the amount of resources (i.e. time, talent, and finances) for communal discipleship and mission**

**Objective 1: to build greater individual and organizational capacity for faithful stewardship and sacrificial giving**

Strategy 1: to identify an organizational ministry partner (like the Barnabas Foundation via Rodger Rice) who has a track record for helping congregations make improvements in ministry participation and financial resourcing

- gain council and congregational approval of identified partner
- formalize partnership agreement and expectations

Strategy 2: to form a stewardship task force (with administrative council representatives and others) who will work with an outside coach/consultant to creatively resource key elements of the action plan

- identify team leader and interested participants
- begin work with consultant/coach

Strategy 3: to provide regular training, assessment, and coaching around time/talents/gifts/passions

- form an oversight team
- reach consensus on training approach and survey tools
- develop needed data base capacity and administrative support
- implement identified processes/methodologies on an annual basis

**Objective 2: to develop more flexibility in the budgeting process for supporting innovative ministry and mission**

Strategy 1: to increase the percentage of giving to missional activities on an annual basis

- involve the administrative council and stewardship task force in developing specific recommendations for resourcing staffing, program, and partnership requests related to mission
- begin increasing annual budget for mission-related ministry

Strategy 2: to create new budget lines and/or funding streams for risk-taking ministry initiatives

(see above recommendations)