



“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.”

Romans 12:2

March 29, 31 and April 2, 2022

Skyland United Methodist Church

Asheville, North Carolina

The Western North Carolina Conference Discovery Experience Team would like to thank the Reverends Dan Hester and Joy Moss, and the congregation of Skyland United Methodist Church for your hospitality and for the privilege of partnering with you. Our prayer is that God will use this process to maximize the potential of your congregation as you seek to make disciples of Jesus Christ. We submit this report to you, which reflects several strengths Skyland UMC employs for successful ministry, some opportunities to improve the ministry of the church, and four recommendations that we believe God is calling Skyland to fulfill for future, fruitful ministry.

Strengths

1. A welcoming congregation with a commitment to mission and service.

The words, “authentic,” “welcoming,” and “felt like home,” were used to describe how people felt about coming to Skyland and choosing to make it their church home. Their outreach includes the Around The Son Preschool, the Bridges Reading Program, daily servicing of two Blessing Boxes, and food distribution events with Manna Food Bank in two local neighborhoods.

In addition, they distributed over \$27,000 to families and local agencies through their COVID-19 Fund. Prior to the pandemic they had a weekly Welcome Table meal for the community they hope to revive. They have done ministries in the community through partnerships with St. Barnabas, the Korean UMC, and Calvary Episcopal churches along with local community non-profit organizations.

People named their adaptability to respond to changes after several pastoral changes and during the pandemic as one of their strengths. They have a willingness to try new things like their outdoor worship services. Several people said they would like to see the outdoor services continue as weather allows. They have embraced their mission motto to “Love, grow, and serve.”

This is a multi-generation church, socio-economically diverse, and has an openness to increasing their racial and ethnic membership and with people who have special needs.

2. Their staff and dedicated, high-capacity lay leaders who have pivoted well during the pandemic and are open to change.

People expressed appreciation for the leadership of Rev. Dan Hester especially during the pandemic and the church’s need to adapt to on-line worship and offering outdoor worship. The need for on-line worship will remain even as we return to in-person worship. Skyland has positioned itself well to step into this opportunity to reach more people via technology.

Rev. Joy Moss is much appreciated for her leadership in children’s ministry that has included her building relationships with the families of the Around the Son pre-school, her work with Confirmation youth and their mentors, and with the development of Small Group ministry. She has taken on the responsibility for the youth ministry until a new Youth Director can be hired.

3. Financial health

Despite the challenges of the pandemic and the loss of in-person worship, their financial obligations were met and pledged giving remained stable. They are grateful for the PPP loans they obtained, they reduced spending in some areas, but were able to pay their staff salaries, apportionments, and commitments to missions.

Growth Opportunities

1. Designing your Church Governing Structure to Fulfill Your Vision

People enthusiastically shared their desire to see Skyland be a place where young families would choose to be involved. In an earlier study by the church there were dreams expressed about reaching the Hispanic/Latino population. However, the way the church governing Board is structured there is no leader or ministry area dedicated to the Book of Discipline designation of Witness Ministries. **“The witness (evangelism) ministries of the church shall give attention to developing and strengthening evangelistic efforts of sharing of personal and congregational stories of Christian experience, faith, and service; communications; Lay Servant Ministries; and other means that give expressions of witness for Jesus Christ.” (paragraph 252.C, The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church, 2016).**

Looking at the current governing structure for Skyland there are fifteen “At Large,” positions allotted among the Administrative Board, Council on Ministries, and Finance, some of which are not presently filled. There are a lot of committees and all together there are over 137 positions to be filled. A continual concern we heard voiced by the people we interviewed was the frustration of having too few volunteers and an overworked group of elected officers. No wonder!

What might it look like to go to a simpler structure, requiring fewer people, built around your vision of “Love, Grow, Serve,” and your administrative committees: Nominations and Leadership, Staff Parish Relations, Finance and Trustees? What if there was a regular training process for newly elected leaders and annual evaluation regarding the current effectiveness and relevancy of church sponsored ministries and missions?

One of the stated values of Skyland is, “We value being a witness to the extraordinary life that we experience in Jesus Christ.” Imagine freeing more people’s time and talents to lead small groups, mentor youth and adults, share their faith with their friends and acquaintances, and be a disciple of Christ serving in the community whose witness inspires new people to know Jesus?

2. Developing an understanding and practice of relational evangelism.

Skyland has an excellent location in South Asheville with a growing population. There were hopes expressed to see their children’s and student ministries grow. They wondered what could attract people to their campus in the hopes they would want to return and become members.

In today’s culture, basing church growth on “attracting” people to come to your campus is no longer effective. People are searching for genuine, caring relationships with other people. Most hurried families today do not need another event or program to add to their busy schedules. The key to church growth today is for church members to seek to be invitational, relational, and go to where the people are gathering. They need to be praying about people with whom they already relate, like their neighbors, their co-workers, their acquaintances, and friends, to invite them to participate in church activities, small groups, and worship inside and outside of the church’s walls.

Think about ways you can offer Christ-like love in your relationships with other people. Consider offering training in faith sharing so people would feel more equipped to engage their friends and acquaintances in conversations about their Christian beliefs and practices. Training in how to engage with people who are different from the congregation would be important.

Many younger adults want an engaging worship experience, and they want to serve in hands on ministries. Consider that some of your personal invitations might be to ask people to join you in serving in the community. Consider building on partnerships you already have with area churches, which in addition to acts of charity, can also be acts of partnership with community agencies who are addressing the challenges of homelessness, hunger, poverty, illiteracy, and other community concerns. Expanding partnerships like these would multiply your impact and elevate your recognition in the community.

3. Equipping Small Groups to multiply and designing a leadership/discipleship development process.

In the Book of Discipline, in addition to the work areas of Nurture, Outreach, and Witness, is Leadership Development and Resourcing Ministries who “shall give attention to the ongoing preparation and development of lay and clergy leaders for the ministry of the church (par. 258.1)

The Small Groups at Skyland are seen as a strength, but they do not have a process of multiplying. Some elected officers shared that finding their replacement has been difficult without a leadership development and officer rotation plan in consistent practice. Leaders of Small Groups need processes for training in multiplication and accountability. Small Groups can not only meet the needs for people seeking help with grieving, parenting, divorce, joblessness, and many other of life’s challenges, but they can also be an effective way for people to become mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our Methodist founder, John Wesley, organized the early Methodists into bands and classes where people prayed for one another, studied the scriptures together, served the community, and held one another with loving accountability for their Christian growth and practice. A leadership/discipleship process based on the Wesley Covenant Small Group process would help nurture and equip more people to serve and to lead.

4. Communication and telling your church’s story.

In an earlier church study communication was noted as a primary concern for Skyland. Now with the pandemic forcing churches to offer on-line and in-person worship, training, and meeting events, this need for clearer, focused, and timely communication is more critical than ever. How can the church best communicate among its members, its on-line regular attenders, as well as finding effective ways to tell the church’s story to its community and beyond?

The Church now, and in the future, will have to continually be adapting and improving its technology to improve its communication in all forms. Significant work has already been done by Skyland’s staff and laity to offer excellent hybrid worship experiences and by Sharon Blythe in the design of their website. Consider ways to improve all facets of communication that includes how you want the community to know about Skyland and the gospel message.

5. A focus on Children, Youth and Family Ministry, and Adult Ministry of any age.

In the MissionInsite Demographics report for the one-mile radius around Skyland the population of infants to 4 years of age dropped between 2010 and 2021 from 266 down to 174 but an increase to 181 by 2026 is predicted. That will still not be back to the 2010 number for this age

group. Could this be because of the rising cost of housing in your immediate community making it hard for young families to live there? However, the population of children ages 5-17 was up from 681 in 2010 to 905 in 2021 and is predicted to increase to 1,043 by 2026. So, there are definitely plenty of children and young families to reach but how will worship and opportunities to engage with church ministries need to adapt to the needs of these young families? Does the church need to consider offering worship and ministry engagement in addition to Sunday, and in a variety of formats, from in-person to podcast and webinar? Does the church need to consider having gatherings on the church's campus but also in people's homes and neighborhoods, and to public gathering spaces like parks and pubs?

As important as children's ministry is, the equally important group is their parents, and adults of any age. The parents need help with living and teaching the faith with their children. They need support and nurture for navigating life challenges that go beyond parenting. But excitement about invitation to adults of any age is essential if there are going to be leaders and mentors for the children, youth, and family ministries.

Who will mentor the new adult Christian among you? Who will be the next group of church elected officers, small group leaders, champions of mission and ministries beyond the walls of the church, if we are not actively welcoming adults of any age? Inviting people to worship may come after we have invited people to a small group or short-term studies, Courageous Conversations, teaching events, or to serve with us in the community. Adult ministry is as vital as ministry to children and youth.

6. Addressing the challenges of your facilities.

Previous church studies identified the challenges of Skyland's existing facilities and there were recommendations for building a Family Life Center type building with flexible space and doing a refreshing of the existing spaces. During our time with you those same concerns are still present. But since the pandemic, and with the current denominational uncertainties, it is hard to ascertain what would be the best next steps. We suggest that you gain more clarity about how to organize your decision making structures, drill deeper into what it means to be a church where you "love, grow, and serve," and then ask, "What kinds of facilities will a 21st century and beyond church need to not only be a place of nurture and growth in our faith, but also a launching place where disciples of Jesus are sent out to serve the world?"

Recommendations

1. Take a pause and assess your assets of people, resources, community service and partnership opportunities, and reflect biblically and theologically on God's vision for Skyland for such a time as this. Then align your staffing, ministries, administration, energies, and resources with God's vision for Skyland.

There are a lot of activities, ministries, missions, and committee work being done at Skyland, and they are good things, but the efforts seem exhausting and lack a cohesive focus. People unanimously discussed the challenge of getting more volunteers to keep all of this running. In recognition that the church is emerging from a pandemic, along with the uncertainties within the denomination, this presents the perfect opportunity to take stock, reflect, and discern God's leading. This may lead to a time of "pruning," or letting go of things that were productive in the

past but may not be now. It needs to be a time of grieving over the losses because of the pandemic. And it can be a great time to experiment with new forms of outreach and ministry to see what can work in today's world. Do not be afraid to fail. Learn from failures and try again. This liminal time is a great time to re-innovate, refresh, and renew, both personally, and as the church, the body of Christ.

Action recommended: The pastor with the Nominations and Leadership Committee will nominate a task leadership group of Vision and Alignment who will work with a trained Transformation Journey Guide. They will assess the assets of all kinds at Skyland, and the parish you serve, to gain clarity about the best uses of those assets and align them with the Vision of how God wants Skyland to LOVE, GROW, and SERVE in our current world. Imagine and plan for what it will look like to be a church where people experience LOVE; GROW in spiritual depth and reach new people; and where they can SERVE their church, community, and the world as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This Vision and Alignment task group will receive training in Asset Based Community Development; explore new ways to reach new people through Fresh Expressions, Dinner Church, and Both/And Worship. They will consider ways to redesign their governing structure, staffing, and allocation of resources to better align with their Vision and free more people for service and spiritual growth. This clarity around Vision will inform the decisions the church needs to make about their current facilities and any future building projects. The Vision and Alignment Task group will take their recommendations for these areas to the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries for approval and implementation.

2. Establish a training, multiplication, and succession process for elected leaders and Small Group leaders that is integrated in a defined discipleship pathway to grow as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

The Small Groups and church committees and work areas are seen as important to the church, but they could be enhanced with training, not only about their purpose and functions, but in the importance of multiplication and equipping of more people to take leadership. Helping new and existing members connect to ways to learn and practice the faith that leads to becoming a fully mature disciple of Jesus Christ was identified as a need at Skyland. The new "Greatest Expedition," series of resources, and the discipleship process described in the "See All the People," resources from the UMC Board of Discipleship Ministries, can help all new and long-term members be discipled in the faith and be led toward acts of service in the name of Christ.

Action Recommended: The pastor with the Committee on Nominations and Leadership will nominate a Task Force on Discipleship/Leadership Development who will work with a trained Transformation Journey Guide to develop training and equipping processes for Small Groups, elected leaders, and church members seeking to grow as disciples. They will submit their proposals for the development of a discipleship/leadership training and multiplication process to the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries for approval and implementation.

3. Train, equip, and empower laity to improve communications and do relational evangelism/witness ministries to reach new people for Jesus Christ.

People want to see the church grow and continue to be a positive force for good in the community. Evangelism/witness for the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ is every Christian's responsibility. Being Christ-like in all of our actions is part of our witness. Helping people to find Jesus is an act of caring. How can we learn how to do that in today's world? What forms of communication, both internal and external, can help us tell the good news of Jesus and improve how we communicate and do ministry with each other and with our community?

Action Recommended: The pastor with the Committee on Nominations and Leadership will nominate a Task Force on Communication and Relational Evangelism/Witness who will work with a trained Transformation Journey Guide to develop training and equipping for people to reach others for Jesus Christ.

1. They will assess all methods of the current communications of the church and make recommendations for improvements and needed additions.
2. This group will seek training in Faith Sharing and Asset Based Community Development to better understand how to reach people who are different from them.
3. They will study effective ways of telling their church's story to the community and how to create a positive name recognition in the community of their church and its message.
4. They will explore new ways of offering worship beyond Sunday that meets the needs and lifestyles of the people in your parish.
5. They will submit their recommendations to the Administrative Board/Council on Ministries for approval and implementation.

Next Steps

- The congregation will hold at least **Two Town Hall Meetings** to discuss these recommendations.
- **Facilitators** for these Town Hall Meetings will be identified by the pastor in conjunction with the Discovery Team.
- The **members of the charge conference will vote on this report** at an official **called charge conference** led by the district superintendent.
- If approved by a **69.5% or more vote** of the official membership present, the Western North Carolina Conference Office of Church Development will designate trained Guides and partner with the church to implement these recommendations.
- If the recommendations do not pass, the Transformation Journey process will cease.

While the District Superintendents were given guidelines about what kind of churches to nominate to become Transformation Journey Churches, **the guideline about the pastor being expected to serve over the next 2-3 years while a Transformation Journey Church completes its process, does not bind the church to keeping its pastor, nor does it guarantee that the pastor will not have to move. The appointment decisions are made**

each year by the Bishop and the Cabinet of Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Rev. Dr. Nancy B. Rankin semi-retired UMC Elder and former District Superintendent. During her 35 years of ministry, she served as senior pastor to two churches with over 1,000 members; and was the Conference Church Development Director. She is now the Coordinator of Transformation Journey; ICF Certified Leadership Coach, Nancy Rankin Coaching, LLC; author of books on Church Assessment, *Checking Vital Signs* and *Choosing the Faithful Path*. B.A. in Christian Education; M.Div. from Duke Divinity School; D.Min. United Theological Seminary. She and her husband, Terry, have two adult children and five grandchildren.

Rev. Dr. Michael Kurtz, UMC Elder, pastor of Asbury UMC in Candler, NC. He has served as lead pastor of six congregations in the WNCC over the past 38 years. Prior to this he taught high school English and coached several athletic teams. Michael is married to Pastor Karen Christy Kurtz, and they have two adult children and two grandchildren. Michael holds degrees from Lees-McRae, Eastern Mennonite, Duke Divinity School, and a D Min from Palmer University. Pastor Kurtz practices part time as a licensed marriage and family therapist. He has authored four books, one geared toward local church ministry which is titled: MENTORING PEW SITTERS INTO SERVANT LEADERS

Rev. Rick Schilling, UMC Elder, pastor of Spruce Pine UMC in Spruce Pine, NC. He also serves on the Blue Ridge District Committee on Ordained Ministry and is the Blue Ridge District Local Pastor Mentor Coordinator. He has his M.Div. degree from Duke University and a degree in Social Work from UNC-CH and has experience in forensic social work, psychotherapy counseling, serving in halfway houses, family shelters, various prison ministries, and non-profit organizations. His passion is to make God real for people through innovative worship, teaching, mentoring, and community partnerships.

Rev. Shonnie Streder, UMC Deacon, Blue Ridge District Vitality Associate. She is working primarily with faith communities throughout Western North Carolina. Her work is centered in facilitating conversations which help to build consensus around shared pathways for ministry. She finds joy in collaboration and group connection and strives to include all voices and perspectives in the decision-making process. To strike up a conversation with Shonnie, just mention parenting toddlers, making soup from scratch, going to Duke but not loving sports ball, or anything from the author James K.A. Smith.

Rev. Dr. Mark Ralls, District Superintendent of the Blue Ridge District, Western North Carolina Conference of The United Methodist Church.

Rev. Rob Hutchinson UMC Elder, Director of Church Development, Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church. He directs the Conference's work with new church plants, existing church revitalization (like Transformation Journey), and other projects and initiatives that foster healthy church systems. He has served a variety of pastoral appointments including very large churches, a brand-new church plant, and several revitalization appointments. His passion for ministry is to help others discover how their everyday lives and story is already a part of THE story of Jesus.

