



MISSION STUDY REPORT

August 2022

FOREWORD

The Mission Study Team (MST) was appointed by the Session of Grace Commons Church, Boulder, Colorado, to discern God's vision for our church and provide guidance for the Pastoral Nominating Committee (PNC). We were tasked with reviewing the current state of our church, understanding the broader social and cultural context of our community, identifying key national trends in our society, and articulating a sense of future direction to inform church leadership.

The MST was formed to discuss the present state of our church, our community, and our nation—talking broadly about important developments, changes, and inflection points that should inform the search for our next pastor. Eventually our deliberations coalesced around the framework we present to Session in this document as the culmination of our work.

In what follows we seek to address four main areas of discernment through a series of questions and corresponding insights:

- (1) What is happening in **our country**?
What are the important national trends affecting the American church?
- (2) What is the status of **our local community**?
Who is our neighbor in Boulder?
- (3) What is the current state of **our church**?
What are our strengths and weaknesses? What challenges and opportunities do we face?

And finally,

- (4) What is **our hope** for the future of our church?
What do we long to see happen at Grace Commons and who do we want to become?

Overall, the overarching theme from our discussions is that our church is at an important point of **tension and transition**. We have been shaken by pastoral resignations, we are disoriented by the COVID-19 pandemic and the corresponding societal shifts, we are anxious and confused about the effects of national politics and cultural trends, we are uncertain about the future of our capital campaign and building renovation projects, and we are saddened by the loss of several covenant partners. We seek a new leader who will help us navigate through these tensions and transitions.

Yet we are also **hopeful and resilient**. Despite the challenges we face there are many signs of health and strength throughout our church. We have reorganized our leadership structure and revised our budget to align with today's realities, our staff went through a process of healing and recovery that restored trust and strengthened their resolve, our financial reserves are abundant and stable, our capital campaign is well-financed and our building plans are approved, our

leadership includes the wisdom and stability of several long-tenured pastors, we developed new technological competencies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we retain our historic downtown location in one of the most amazing cities in the United States. Plus, a spirit of openness and possibility pervades our church—we know changes are necessary but remain optimistic about the future.

But most of all, we have a Savior who loves us unconditionally and is with us until the end of the age. We trust that God is present with us during this unique time and is guiding us to a deeper understanding of His will and plans for our church community.

In humility and prayer,

The Mission Study Team:

Cindy Avenell
Stan Benjamin
Sandy Bracken
Linda Carlson
Mary-Woodson Felker
Matthew Koschmann

1. WHAT IS HAPPENING IN OUR COUNTRY?

What are the important national trends affecting the American church?

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. ~2 Corinthians 4:18

We live in the wealthiest, most prosperous nation in history with a dynamic economy, world-class education, abundant resources, and unparalleled natural beauty. Yet as we enter the third decade of the 21st Century recent trends have created worry and stress about the present and future of our nation. These include:

- COVID-19 ravished our nation, which led the world in infections and deaths. Effects of the pandemic revealed deep and troubling issues that were exacerbated over the past two years of lockdown and restrictions.
- Social and racial tensions escalated after the public video of George Floyd's murder in May 2020, along with several other high-profile deaths at the hands of the police.
- Increased political polarization throughout communities and families related to a contested national election and misinformation throughout our news and social media
- Growing mental health problems due to trauma and stress
- A significant increase in mass shooting and gun violence (including here in Boulder at King Soopers)
- Anxiety and uncertainty around climate change and extreme weather events (including the Marshall Fire here in Boulder County)
- Growing inequality and a shrinking middle class
- High inflation and fears of a looming recession
- A dynamic technological environment that is changing faster than ever before

Furthermore, there are additional additional trends that directly impact Christian congregations:

- Our identity as Christians has become co-mingled with political agendas.
- Scandals and the fall of high-profile clergy and Christian leaders have disillusioned faithful Christians, turned away seekers, and validated critics of Christianity.
- A dramatic decline in Sunday church attendance and many Christians no longer engaged in an organized church. ([Christianity Today, 3/29/22](#))

Yet in spite of these challenging trends we are commanded not to worry:

Jesus said, *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”* ~ Matthew 6:25-34

This is the Church’s unique moment and opportunity to lead, rather than react. Rather than worry or argue about the culture, let us remember that God values all peoples as His treasured creation. Above all, let us embrace the work and movement of the Holy Spirit in and among all believers. These huge challenges in the larger US Church context serve as a backdrop for tensions that we, with God’s provision, can continue to carefully hold together at Grace Commons Church. We believe the role of the Church is vital to pointing all communities and people groups to the hope, power and love of Christ.

2. WHAT IS THE STATUS OF OUR **LOCAL COMMUNITY**?

Who is our neighbor in Boulder?

*For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."
~ Galatians 5:14*

Boulder is one of the most unique, dynamic, and desirable cities in the United States. It is consistently ranked as one of the [best places to live](#), one of the [happiest](#), [healthiest](#), and [friendliest](#) cities in America, and one of the best places for [community well-being](#). Plus, the surrounding townships of broader Boulder County (Louisville, Superior, Lafayette, and Longmont) regularly top the lists of various U.S. community rankings. We take pride in our geography and natural beauty and we value the cultural variety and active lifestyles that make our city distinct.

Boulder is also an affluent community with high incomes and property values compared to the rest of the United States:

	United States	Colorado* (2020)	Boulder* (2020)	Boulder** (2022)
Median household income	\$67,521	\$75,231	\$87,476	\$110,000
Median home value	\$374,900	\$369,900	\$539,100	\$736,000

* [US Census Bureau](#) (2016-2020)

** [World population review](#)

Boulder is home to Colorado's flagship state university and several national laboratories, so we have a high concentration of people with advanced degrees and a professional culture that values inquiry and analysis. Plus, we have a thriving tech and startup sector, which gives our city a spirit of entrepreneurship, risk, and energy. Boulder is also socially conscious and politically active, voting overwhelmingly Democratic in most elections and supporting higher taxes to fund numerous social initiatives and programs.

Accordingly, Boulder residents tend to be fairly homogeneous (i.e., wealthy and white), while there is also a sizable number of people who live outside the city limits and commute into Boulder. Estimates are that over [40,000 people per day](#) commute in and out of Boulder for work. In addition, university students, who make up $\frac{1}{3}$ of Boulder's population, move in and out of Boulder in relation to the academic calendar and the availability and affordability of rental units.

Boulder is also a place of religious diversity and spiritual eclecticism. There are several Protestant and Catholic churches throughout the city and broader county. Boulder is also home to the nation's only Buddhist university and boasts a thriving sector of wellness and healing practices. Plus, there is a vocal number of skeptics, agnostics, and atheists that shape our community and influence our public discourse.

Overall, Boulder is a place where environmentalism, education, outdoor recreation, business, politics, and spirituality are taken seriously among a population that is predominantly wealthy and white—but also among a service sector and growing immigrant populations that are not well integrated into mainstream Boulder culture. This makes for a dynamic and exciting city, but also with some key fault lines just beneath the surface that shape our landscape.

3. WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF OUR CHURCH?

What are our strengths and weaknesses? What challenges and opportunities do we face?

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. ~ I Corinthians 15:58

Our church has been impacted by the larger trends in our country and community over the last 5-10 years. Plus, we are still adjusting to the immediate effects of recent pastoral resignations, budget cuts, and reorganization. We are in a time of tension and transition, but also hopeful about the future and resilient in response to the challenges we have faced.

This section of the document reports on our current ministries; key developments since the previous Mission Study Report; the current state of attendance, membership, finances, and giving; and challenges we face as we look to the future.

The previous [mission study report for our church](#) was written in 2010 by a committee similar to ours. This report recounts the long history of our church with its start in 1872 and with its strengths and weaknesses at that point in time. We build upon that report with developments since 2010 and encourage readers to review that report for more historical context about Grace Commons/First Presbyterian Church.

Additionally, in 2016 our church hired TAG Consulting (now [LFM Ministries](#)) to conduct a thorough “discovery report” and guide us in a new visioning process in response to our departure from PC(USA). This 2 ½ year endeavor resulted in the [Boulder Vision Project](#). The full report can be accessed [here](#) and a summary of the vision process can be accessed [here](#). However, all of this work preceded the COVID-19 pandemic and the pastoral resignations of 2020. Much of the information and analysis in the TAG report is still accurate and relevant, but much has changed. Thus the need for this updated mission study report.

We begin with our church’s [core values](#) written in 2016 by Session and reconfirmed in 2021:

- Jesus Christ - He transforms lives as He is encountered in scripture and community.
 - Boulder - We pursue God’s heart for a flourishing city and beyond.
 - Youth - We follow Jesus’ example in inviting and discipling younger generations.
 - Prayer - God meets and shapes us as we submit to His Spirit.
 - Multi-generational community - We worship and serve together, side by side.
 - Leadership - We invest in emerging disciples for the next generation of gospel leaders here and around the world.
-

These core values are meant to describe both who we are and who we aspire to be as a church.

Furthermore, our church has a strong foundation of established ministries including:

-
- Boulder Faith & Work Initiative
 - Mercy ministries: Lamb's Lunch (weekly meals) and Deacons closet (clothing and supplies)
 - Annex: University student ministry
 - Kids Trek children's ministry
 - Fishy (middle school) and Club (high school) ministries
 - ROOTS 55+ seniors ministry
 - MOPS (moms of preschoolers)
 - Racial justice ministry
 - Doorways international ministry (English program for women)
 - Kids Hope (elementary school outreach)
 - Prayer ministry & training
 - Theology & doctrine classes
 - Stephen Ministry
 - Continued support for 16 missionaries and support for several seminary students each year
 - Music & arts ministry
-

Several of these ministries began after and in response to the 2010 Mission Study Report. And many of these ministries leverage our downtown Boulder location to serve our community where they are at and to be a visible presence of God's love and mercy in the heart of our city. This includes:

- Hosting lunches for students from nearby Boulder High School
- Serving food and clothing to the homeless and needy
- Hosting the Boulder Symphony and Boulder International Film Festival
- Serving Thanksgiving dinner for university students
- Offering health and hygiene events for the disadvantaged

The activities of these ministries are key entry points for many non-members to access our church beyond Sunday morning worship.

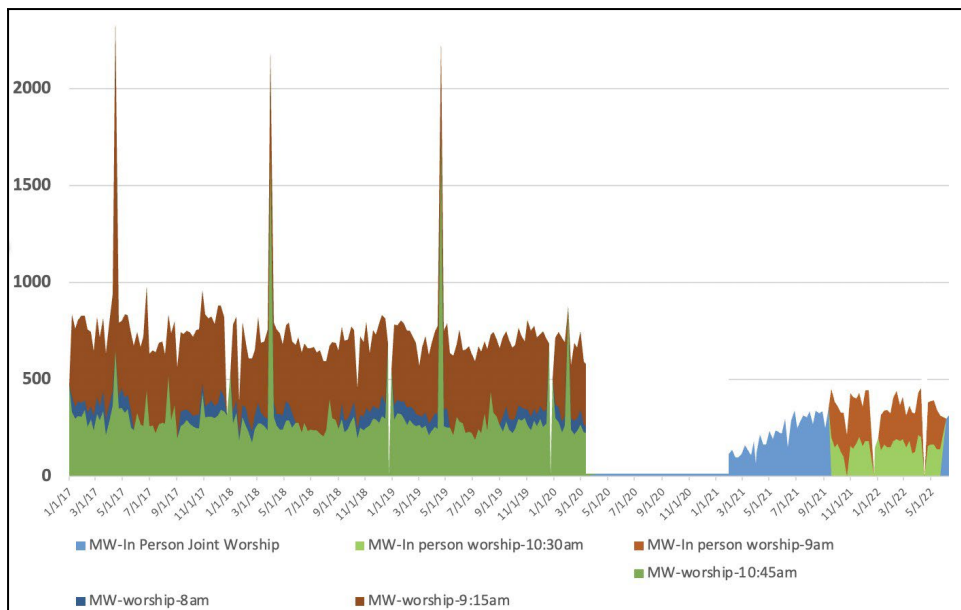
There have also been other notable developments at our church since—and in response to—the 2010 Mission Study Report:

- A renewed emphasis on prayer through the prayer ministry, including the addition of prayer ministers after each Sunday morning service and a Wednesday evening prayer and worship service. This emphasis responds to what the 2010 mission study report noted about the ongoing struggle between self-reliance vs. reliance on God.
- A strengthened contemporary service developed in the last 8 years over the thinly-attended service noted in the 2010 report, which complements the traditional service.
- In 2014 we began hosting an independent Spanish-speaking church, Casa de Dios Shalom, in one of our buildings.
- Denominational transition: In 2016 our church moved from PC(USA) to ECO. This move required establishing a new constitution and resolution of all debts to PC(USA) to be able to solely own the Grace Commons Church property. Since that time we have participated in several ECO national gatherings and several other PC(USA) churches have joined ECO.
- In 2019 we initiated a regular meeting between people at Grace Commons and the Islamic Center of Boulder to discuss Christian-Muslim relations and build new friendships.
- In 2020 as part of the denominational transition to ECO we changed our name from First Presbyterian to Grace Commons Church.
- A more balanced pulpit rotation during this time of transition that includes more women and lay preaching. Session indicates that they intend to continue this balanced approach with the new pastor participating in a preaching rotation with the other pastors and lay leaders (specific rotation to be decided during the hiring process).

ATTENDANCE

In-person Sunday attendance averaged 700-800 (excluding Easter) during 2017-2019 before COVID-19 restrictions began in March 2020. After in-person services were restored in spring 2021 attendance climbed back to ~300 in joint services and to ~400 with two services again during the 2021-22 school year. The contemporary service shows up as the later service (10:30 or 10:45am) in the attendance figures below for 2017-2022.

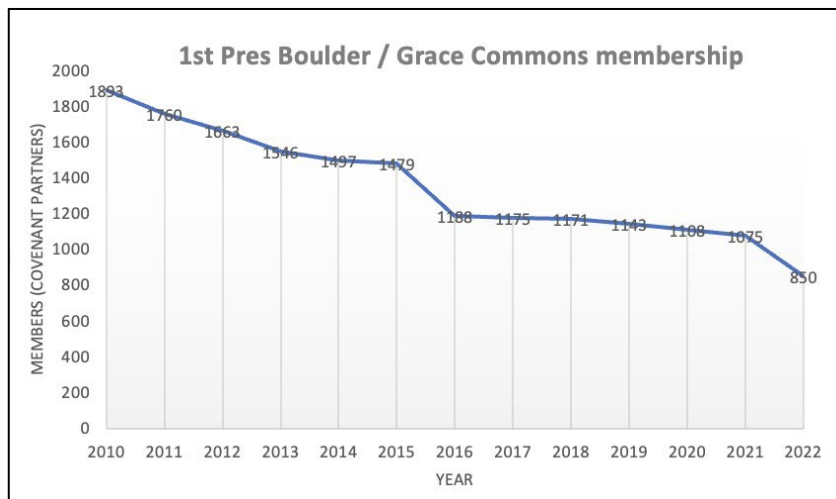
Figure 1: Sunday morning worship (MW) attendance for First Presbyterian/Grace Commons Church 2017-2022



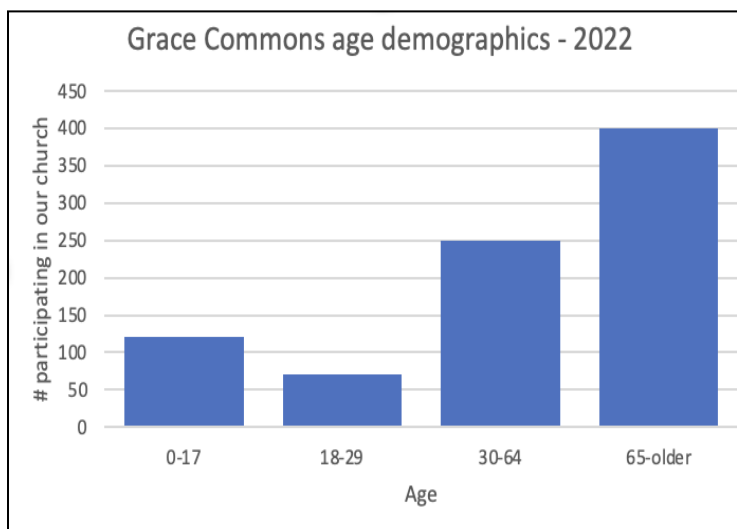
A live virtual worship service on YouTube was added in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and continues today. Sunday morning worship services are also cataloged online for viewing at any time. YouTube analytics indicate that 60-100 people continue to log into live online services even though we have returned to in-person worship.

COVENANT PARTNERSHIP (MEMBERSHIP)

Membership at our church showed a 35% drop from 2010-2016, followed by a leveling off period of 3 years. This was followed by another 30% reduction since 2019 and especially in response to the 2021-2022 transition and pastoral resignations.

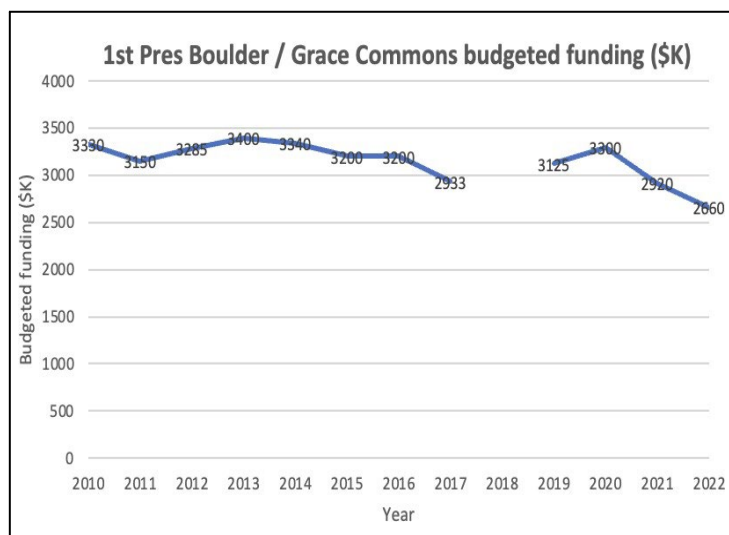


Current demographics affirm trends that have been characteristic of our church for years—that most of our covenant partners are older and our smallest demographic is young adults:



GIVING & FINANCES

Giving (as approximated by budgeted spending based on pledging and previous giving) has been relatively flat over the 2010-2020 period but has dropped 18% in the last 2 years.



GCC switched from a calendar-year budget in 2018 to a ministry-year (MY) budget from July to June of the following year. MY2022 is from July 2021 through June 2022

Session and the Board of Trustees also confirm the following budget data points:

- ~\$1 million in reserves
- ~\$600K set aside for pastoral housing
- Over \$7 million already raised/pledged for the Boulder Vision capital campaign

Despite the health of our ministries and the stable aspects of our resources, we also see a number of **challenges on the immediate horizon** that require effective leadership.

We are still whirling from the **COVID-19 pandemic** and uncertain about the implications for Sunday morning attendance and virtual worship; we are wounded from the **behavior and departure of two beloved pastors**, and several members have left or stopped attending in response to the pain and disillusionment; we are subject to broader national trends related to **decreasing church attendance, membership, and giving**—especially among young adults, we continue to struggle with cultivating **ethnic, racial, and socioeconomic diversity** despite our best intentions; we have seen a **decline in youth ministry** programs across all age groups; our staff experienced **fatigue and discouragement** throughout this period of transition; we have an **aging congregation** and our strength of being a multigenerational church is waning; and there have been **divisions in our Session** about how to operate our church and respond to cultural/political developments, resulting in three resignations.

Yet we also see many positive recent developments that give us a renewed sense of hope for the future. Our staff has been through a **process of healing and recovery** that has made them more resilient and optimistic; the experience with our **transitional pastor** has been positive and constructive; our church's **response to the Marshall Fire** was extensive and recognized throughout the community; the **realignment of staff** was well-received and promises to enable a more productive ministry structure; we have a **strong financial foundation** to hire a new senior pastor and pursue new building projects; we have a **robust remodeling plan** for our church building and adjacent Annex property that already has unanimous approval from the City of Boulder; we have a **great partnership with the independent preschool** (Pathways) that operates within our building; and we have been able to maintain a **healthy balance/tension** between traditional and contemporary worship styles as well as conservative and liberal politics and theology—this multifaceted approach is a strength of our church.

We have experienced unprecedented changes, disruptions, and disappointments here at Grace Commons Church. Yet we are healing and experiencing God's mercy and grace through all of it. We have become more resilient, open to change, and hopeful about the future. The state of our church is both uncertain and exciting, cautious and optimistic. We trust that our best days are yet to come.

4. WHAT IS **OUR HOPE** FOR THE FUTURE OF OUR CHURCH?

What do we long to see happen at Grace Commons and who do we want to become?

Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from Him. ~ Psalm 62:5

In this final section we reiterate and expand upon many hopeful signs for our church that we mentioned above. Our hope is to be a church for the City of Boulder and the surrounding County. We want to be part of God's work toward his kingdom in our city. We see countless opportunities to love our city in the intersections of culture, business, education and spirituality. We are a church who strives to love and feed this generation yet preparing for the generation to come. Our name is Grace Commons in the hope of becoming a common space for our neighbors to gather, learn, play and create. Jesus' example shows us to love in these ways and break down barriers that impede openness and service to our City and its people. By God's grace, may this be so.

What we need most at this time of transition and tension is **a new senior pastor who is a servant leader**—someone who is able to inspire, equip, and lead the rest of our staff with wisdom, grace, and truth; someone who can help us navigate the challenges we mentioned above—challenges of diversity and inequality, challenges of culture and polarization, challenges of change and uncertainty; challenges of ministry and witness. We pray for a pastoral leader that can rise up and help fulfill God's hope for Grace Commons and our city.

While Grace Commons Church has experienced challenges over the last few years, strides have been made and signs of hope, growth and healing are evident among the staff, lay leadership, and congregation. Examples include:

Staff

We completed a realignment of existing staff to areas of expertise, passion, calling, and synergy—especially for ministry areas related to children, middle and high school, university students, young adults, discipleship and spiritual formation, and congregational care. There is a renewed openness among our staff towards counseling and job training, and more willingness to share new ideas and be more involved in decision-making processes for their ministry areas. Plus, many staff job descriptions have been rewritten to include a focus on equipping covenant partners so that our church body is fully engaged, with all of us using our spiritual gifts and thriving in the work to which God has called us.

Lay Leadership

There is increased cooperation between working groups, such as Trustees and Session working together to expand and refine Trustees' charter. This enhances Session's ability to define key ministry priorities with clarity and discernment. Plus, there is increased communication and cooperation between Deacons, Trustees and Session as a result of responding to the Marshall Fire Relief Efforts. Also, with continued approval from

Trustees for the Boulder Vision Project (BVP), our desire to monetize our physical assets and align those assets with our mission (which was part of the 2016 TAG process) is happening. Trustees will remain on top of the financial sustainability of the various aspects of the BVP.

Covenant Partners

Increased willingness of covenant partners to commit to lay leadership roles, especially that of Deacons, which had experienced a sharp decline in 2021-22. There is a renewed willingness among covenant partners to keep vital ministries going that impact the community at large. We have begun a process with new leadership to redefine how our mercy ministries engage with Boulder and beyond to ensure they are relevant and equipping, rather than enabling those they serve. Additionally, these ministries will explore strategic partnerships with other churches and non-profit organizations. And we saw countless members involved in the immediate and generous outpouring of support for those impacted by the Marshall Fire since January 2022.

Youth

We are rebuilding and reimagining our youth programming across all ages, including a realignment of leaders and potential new hires. Plus, we have a rich history of partnering with other churches for youth ministry and will continue developing new partnerships to serve the youth in our community in a comprehensive manner, not just on Sundays.

As we consider the unique characteristics of Grace Commons Church, the Boulder community, and the culture in which we live, we see the challenges we face are opportunities “to sharpen our identity as the people of God” and make us open to change and new beginnings (Trueman, *Strange New World*).

- **Knowing** who we are as children of God: ongoing Self-examination, cultivate humility, reflect and honor in others the image of God, be deeply rooted in God’s Word
- **Understanding** our role as Jesus followers: discipleship, model a flourishing community that is a compelling alternative to the world culture, make a priority to understand and disciple the next generation (Gen Z and Millennials)
- **Tapping into the power** available through the **Holy Spirit** who can equip our church to bring life and light to our culture: rooted in Holy Scripture, rhythms of worship & prayer, unifying us in Spirit and Truth

Our church is well aware of our charge given by The Great Commission. We know we must always be searching for the new way to reach people with Jesus’s message. A missionary spirit must cross social, economic, racial, gender and age boundaries to engage more people with the Gospel and Jesus himself. We acknowledge we live in a religiously diverse environment.

The Gospel does not change but the modes and methods of reaching people must change and adapt with time. God in his goodness has blessed Grace Commons with relational capital, vision, and financial resources to move into different times with energy and a dynamic approach. Our prayer is to be further formed into God’s people and be a redemptive force for the flourishing of our generation and the next.