

Plymouth

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

2020 – 2025 Strategic Plan

Practice radical love everywhere and always.

Through this strategic plan, we seek to provide Plymouth Church with four foundational practices to help us become closer to the church God imagines.

Practicing Meaning & Purpose

- We live our faith every day through study, through worship and prayer, and by being ministers of Jesus Christ at home, at work, and in the community.

Practicing Hospitality & Belonging

- We pray for the gift of difference as we celebrate and welcome all.

Practicing Justice & Kindness

- We pursue God's requirement to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.

*Practicing Operational Excellence:
We support our work with effective structures
and digital tools to create a frictionless
experience for everyone.*

Plymouth Church

2020-2025 Strategic Plan: Practicing Radical Love

Introduction

In June 2019, the Long-Range Planning Task Force of Plymouth Church (the five most recent Past Moderators, the current Moderator, and the Moderator-Elect) called for the creation of a new strategic plan for Plymouth Church. It had been 10 years since the crafting of the last strategic plan, “Fan the Flame,” and church leadership concluded that Plymouth Church needed a new plan that emerged from a “broad-based, highly participatory process to claim a fresh vision and set clear goals and priorities for the next 3 - 5 years to enable the Senior Minister, staff and Church Council to lead effectively” (from “Report and Recommendations of the Long-Range Planning Task Force,” June 25, 2019). Committee members were selected from names submitted by each Board of the Church Council, and the team was guided by our consultant Rev. Sarai Schnucker Rice.

And then, change. In March 2020, just as our data collection was about to conclude, our world, our nation and our lives changed more than any of us could have imagined with the COVID-19 pandemic. And then, more change. On July 21, Plymouth’s Senior Minister, Matt Mardis-LeCroy resigned. You might ask, how do you deliver a strategic plan without a Senior Minister? Because this vision for Plymouth Church comes from the life of this congregation, and because we have just gone through a very deliberate process of re-evaluating who we are and where we want to go, we see this strategic plan as a gift in the search for the next Senior Minister. We would ask that it be included as part of the profile for the search for the Senior Minister.

This new strategic plan, “Practicing Radical Love,” is the product of a participatory process spanning nearly a year and shaped by congregational input, relevant research, interviews, and hours of discussion, debate, and discernment among the members of the strategic planning committee.

In our research, the planning committee learned that mainstream Protestant churches like Plymouth are facing a critical moment in their history. Throughout the United States membership is declining, attendance at services is down, congregations are aging, and young adults do not find the current church environment appealing.

In order to learn more, we talked with leaders of vibrant, growing churches around the country, who described growth as an output of a clearly identified vision/mission and a relentless focus on a handful of key goals and priorities that shape all major decisions within the congregation. We also talked with members of Plymouth’s ministerial staff and other key staff and leaders about their hopes and dreams for our congregation.

Finally, to gather member data, we invited Plymouth members themselves into the conversation. More than 350 Plymouth members participated in small group sessions which we called Congregational Triad Conversations. Through the triad process, members sat in groups of three to answer six questions (see Appendices A and B), sharing their ideas and opinions about “what’s next for Plymouth?” (Unfortunately, the last scheduled triad meeting had to be canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.) To reach as many members as possible, we created additional ways for members to participate using email (25 responses) and Survey Monkey (52 completed surveys). Finally, in light of the pandemic and the church’s response to it, we also asked members to share their thoughts about what they had learned about themselves and the church during this difficult time (32 responses).

Through this approach, major themes emerged that would shape Plymouth’s vision, goals, and priorities, including:

1. A profound appreciation for Plymouth Church’s legacy of inspiring worship, beautiful music, and provocative and thoughtful sermons

The Sunday morning service continues to be well-attended, as does the Saturday night alternative worship service. The recent addition of more online options due to COVID-19 has also been successful, especially for members who are not always able to attend in person.

2. A stirring desire for Plymouth members to grow even further into the love of God and neighbor

Plymouth members want to engage in readings, classes, and discussion groups, both to explore new and diverse ideas and to further deepen their Christian love by practicing it in families, in workplaces, and in the community.

3. A yearning to move beyond the current polarization of conversations and beliefs

While members seek a place that is open to differing ideas and beliefs, it is a challenge to maintain and value diversity in today’s hyper-polarized environment, especially when polarization has already claimed close friendships, resulted in members leaving, and created awkwardness in conversations and relationships. If we are to continue to “resolve to love” and “unite to serve,” we may need to relearn how to “agree to differ.”

4. A critical need to focus on the youth of Plymouth Church and our community

Members recognize the vibrancy of our youth music programs, church school, and Matins, but yearn for a church that offers a variety of ways for youth to create community, engage in the work of the church, and explore their own faith.

5. A desire to feel more connected to each other and informed about the work of the church and its partners

Plymouth Church members want to be in community with each other and connected to the work of the church, but they also want to extend their commitment to justice and kindness beyond the walls of the church.

6. A continuing commitment to vigilance regarding matters of justice and compassion for those needing kindness

Plymouth Church is proud of having been on the forefront of social justice issues like gender equality, marriage equality, racial justice, and LGBTQ rights. Members want to continue this kind of work in the future, while acknowledging that, on some issues, it will be more important to partner than to lead.

7. A longing to become more diverse

Members have a clear interest in creating a more diverse congregation that reflects the growing diversity within the Greater Des Moines community.

8. A need to review the church's governance structures, systems, and decision-making processes

Just as Plymouth Church needs a fresh vision, it also needs to take a fresh look at its systems of governance and operations. A critical review of the church council structure, boards, committees, information systems, and decision-making processes is needed in order to support a dynamic, evolving congregation. Additionally, improved information systems and forms of communication will be critical to support the efforts of staff and the congregation.

9. An absolute requirement that Plymouth become more skilled in the kinds of communication and technology needed to reach and connect with members and empower staff

Plymouth needs to embrace the exponential growth rate of technology and adopt it as a critical means for achieving its mission.

Perhaps most important, we learned that despite all our differences, this congregation and its staff love Plymouth Church. Universally, people recounted stories about their first connection with Plymouth and how they “fell in love” with its people, its history, and the warm embrace of a Christian community that extends a welcome to all.

Plymouth Church is rooted in the history of the Congregational Church and the United Church of Christ. We are recognized nationally as leaders in progressive theology. We are big enough and we have enough resources to be excellent in anything that we undertake. As we turn toward

2025, we believe that we are called to be a congregation of God's people practicing radical love, a goal that will begin to be realized through the implementation of this plan.

Respectfully submitted, Plymouth Church Strategic Planning Committee members

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Appendix A: Triad Congregational Conversation Questions

Plymouth

UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Strategic Plan 2020: God is still speaking; Plymouth is listening.

Congregational Triad Conversations Questions

Question #1: What about Plymouth feeds your soul or helps you grow spiritually, and how could our congregation do an even better job of helping you?

Question #2: If you could name one amazing thing Plymouth will do in the next 3-5 years that would make an incredible difference in the life of the community: (1) what would it be? and (2) what would you be willing to do to help?

Question #3: When an organization tries to move in a new direction or reach new people, it sometimes needs to stop some of its current activities. What could Plymouth stop doing, or do less of, in order to make space for something new?

Question #4: As you think about your answer to this question, do not limit yourself to activities that have to happen in the building or require current staff. If you think about family or friends who are not currently involved at Plymouth, what is one thing Plymouth could do that might be of interested to them?

Question #5: What is God calling Plymouth Church to commit to doing over the next five years?

Question #6: To you, what is the most critical issue facing Plymouth?

APPENDIX B - MEMBER DATA COLLECTION – Triad Questions

Congregational Triad Conversations

1. 9 of 10 scheduled congregational triad conversations were held (Edgewater, March 12, canceled)
2. 369 total respondents
 - a. 260 in-person triad conversations
 - b. 52 via Survey Monkey
 - c. 25 via confidential Gmail address
 - d. 32 respondents to pandemic survey question
3. Demographic breakdown

<u>AGE GRP</u>	<u>QTY</u>
13 – 17	62
18 – 24	05
25 – 30	03
30 – 49	44
50 – 64	72
65 – 75	77
76 – 86	34
87+	07
NA	<u>30</u> (demographic information not provided by respondent)
TOTAL	337
+	<u>32</u> (demographic information not provided by respondent)
	369

(Compiled by Pam Kenyon, Chair, Strategic Planning Committee)

2020-2025 Strategic Plan

Practicing Radical Love Everywhere and Always

Assumptions and Beliefs

1. We believe God is calling Plymouth to be a center for joy, celebration, curiosity, reflection, inclusion and compassion.
2. Plymouth's deepest identity — radical love for its members and community — rests on four foundational practices:
 - 1) Practicing Meaning & Purpose. We live our faith every day through study, through worship and prayer, and by being ministers of Jesus Christ at home, at work, and in the community.
 - 2) Practicing Hospitality & Belonging. We pray for the gift of difference as we celebrate and welcome all.
 - 3) Practicing Justice & Kindness. We pursue God's requirement to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly.
 - 4) Practicing Operational Excellence. We support our work with effective structures and digital tools to create a frictionless experience for everyone.
3. The culture in which Plymouth exists is rapidly and constantly changing, which means that Plymouth's work, its staff, its facilities, and its use of resources will need to change as well. We must be willing to disrupt our traditional ways of thinking and behaving, including letting go of long-standing programs and practices, if we are to adapt to the new world to which God calls us.
4. As the culture changes, our staffing design and the skills and competencies we require from our staff will change as well. We will need to look for new sets of skills and new learning and leadership capacities. An inclusive workforce is imperative.
5. Not all participants in Plymouth's programming will be members, and not all members will be participants in all things. We must be open to new ways of relating to Plymouth and we must search for new approaches to finding and engaging with members and participants.
6. The experiences that people have at other churches and in other groups will shape what they expect and need from Plymouth. The way we organize ourselves and the services and programs we provide will need to be both grounded in faith and attuned to the needs and expectations of our members and participants.
7. As we interact with the community, there will be times when we are called to be leaders, times when we are called to be partners, and times when we are called to be followers.

Strengths

1. Plymouth is known as a progressive and welcoming congregation in which members agree to differ, resolve to love, and unite to serve. It uses its expertise, voice and relationships with other congregations and organizations in the community to address community issues and create community solutions.
2. Plymouth's size and resources ensure that it is able to be excellent in all aspects of its work.

Key Objectives

1. Agility/Adaptability
We will experiment and adapt across all aspects of our work to better respond to the emerging needs of members and participants.
2. Member/Participant Focus
We will engage members and participants on their terms. This will require closer listening, a deeper understanding of their needs, and better tracking of their interests in response to our ministry. We will focus on providing a friction-free experience. We will provide extraordinary member care by investing in the right mix of people, processes, and technology.
3. Transparency
We will strive to ensure transparency to Plymouth's members and participants by making clear and adhering to all decision-making processes and by providing clear and comprehensive financial and other information.
4. Alignment
We will align all aspects of the church's work around our goals and our four foundational practices: meaning & purpose, hospitality & belonging, justice & kindness, and operational excellence.
5. Staff Development
We will attract, develop, and retain staff who are insightful, flexible, open to change, and gifted at envisioning and executing new, as well as known, ways of being church.

Initiatives

Through extensive congregational surveys, interviews, and prayer, we have identified these four practices which will serve as the core for Plymouth's ministry and operations for the next three to five years. To establish these practices, we developed 12 key initiatives listed below, each important enough to merit specific mention, attention, and investment. (Please note: We're including examples for each recommendation, designed to help you think about the initiatives. While they are not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive, **copy in boldface** represents specific recommendations; *copy in italic* represents ideas or examples.)

We have dared to "dream big" as we fully expect the Church and the Foundation to utilize some of its reserves to make Plymouth closer to what we all know it can be. At the same time, these items are left intentionally high-level so as to allow for broad latitude in implementation by the Staff, Church Council, and the Congregation.

High-level Roadmap

- Upon approval by Church Council, this Strategic Plan will serve as the guiding document for Plymouth's Staff, Church Council, Plymouth Foundation, and Church Boards and Committees.
- To implement this plan, all staff responsibilities and goals will be updated to reflect accountability for execution of the Strategic Plan. In addition, all mission and vision statements for all Boards and Committees will be rewritten, where necessary, to conform to this plan.
- This Strategic Plan will be integrated into the recruitment and hiring process for both the interim and permanent Senior Minister. In addition, this plan will be used in all other hiring decisions for all positions at any level going forward, whether permanent or temporary.
- Church Council will serve as the official implementing body and hold ultimate accountability for adherence to this plan. Church Council will add a standing item to its regular meeting agenda to discuss progress on execution of this Strategic Plan. On a quarterly basis, The Council will formally evaluate and communicate with the Church Membership on progress in implementing the four practices and 12 initiatives to determine if change in operations is necessary to accomplish these objectives.

Practicing Meaning & Purpose

- 1. Create small group opportunities that offer venues other than the Plymouth building as sacred spaces.**

Examples might include in-home relational groups, prayer-in-the-park, off-site Bible study, Plymouth at coffee shops and breweries, and groups for people at different life stages (e.g., people whose children have left for college, Life After Death Of Spouse [LADOS], etc.).

- 2. Reimagine and invest in the Center for Spiritual Growth: Take advantage of the opportunity to invest in and utilize building spaces differently, create a center of excellence for communal as well as personal spiritual growth, develop additional inter-faith dialogues, and develop a curriculum that helps lay people discern if they are called to seminary.**

Practicing Hospitality & Belonging

- 3. Offer a hospitable and comprehensive program for all children and youth, including hiring a dedicated youth minister.**

What we heard from members, including many middle-schoolers and high schoolers, is that Plymouth does not have a full range of programming for children and youth. What we heard through interviews with other churches is that this is unusual for a church of our size. In particular, beginning with 7th grade our young people have only one path (Confirmation for grades 7 and 8, and Matins for grades 9 thru 12). This does not meet the diverse needs of our children nor does it support Plymouth's ability to welcome and embrace families with children. We need to prioritize excellence in faith development from ages 0 thru 18.

- 4. Continue to develop excellent alternative opportunities for worship and connection.**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought Plymouth to a whole new level of digital connectivity, making it possible for not only members but also strangers to worship with us. Many of Plymouth's members also appreciated the intimacy and accessibility of the spiritual and informational opportunities. Plymouth must sustain many of these efforts and continue innovating in ways that meet the needs of its members and potential members.

Practicing Justice & Kindness

- 5. Identify, create, and coordinate opportunities for members and participants to live their faith through volunteer service to others beyond Plymouth's campus.**

To make these opportunities more accessible and inclusive, create a volunteer section on Plymouth's website that makes it easy to find and sign up for both church-based and community-based opportunities.

6. Be in solidarity with People of Color in the community as we all seek to end systemic racism.

We heard in the triad conversations a lot of discomfort about the process of the Black Lives Matter banner decision. In the months since those conversations, the country has reached an inflection point. And so has Plymouth. To truly address systemic racism, Plymouth needs to commit to becoming an actively anti-racist church. Among other things, this means we need to recognize when we should lead, when we should partner, and when we should follow. For example, members can be encouraged to join and support actions that make progress on issues such as voting rights restoration.

7. Constantly strengthen our commitment to environmental stewardship.

For example, create an environmental stewardship plan and target zero emissions

Practicing Operational Excellence

8. Create a Marketing/Communications Plan, including a plan for expanded digital communication that informs both members and the wider community of the opportunities available at Plymouth.

9. Create a Facilities Plan that ensures the safety, beauty, and maintenance of the campus while providing for a welcoming environment and flexible use.

10. Establish an Information Technology (IT) staff to support all work of the church.

11. Implement hiring policies that ensure, as much as possible, that administrative and support positions are full-time, benefit-eligible positions.

12. Commit to a transparent and efficient governance structure, including reducing the number of voting members of Church Council. Meet less, pray more.