

An Introduction: First Baptist Church of La Crosse Wisconsin

First Baptist Church of La Crosse (FBCLC), an American Baptist congregation, was founded in 1850 and is located in La Crosse Wisconsin, a city of approximately 55 thousand. Surrounding communities within a 15 mile radius include a population of another 30 thousand. La Crosse is located on the East bank of the Mississippi River and serves as the economic hub of a five county area. Our church facility and grounds are in the central city, about five blocks from downtown La Crosse.

Our immediate surroundings are made up of largely residential and multifamily homes and student housing. Two universities, the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse and Viterbo University and a technical college are within walking distance of our church. The city of La Crosse has two world class medical facilities that are located within the city.

Who We Are

We are a small congregation. Our membership includes 50 persons. A typical Sunday Worship service attracts 30 to 40 members and friends. Many of our members are older. (See Attachment A.) We are in partnership with our 60 American Baptist Churches in Wisconsin and more than 5,500 congregations in the United States. While we enjoy a special relationship with our American Baptist colleagues, we value and participate in ecumenical experiences while sharing God's love. Our theology is progressive and accepting. We believe that the teachings of the scriptures (Both the Old and New Testament) are meant to be applied to the world in which we live.

Our worship is largely traditional. (See Attachment B.) Sunday worship typically includes congregational singing, prayer, scripture readings from the common lectionary, a sermon, and

music by a small but talented choir. We value inspirational and biblical preaching that is informed by recognition of both the historical and cultural context of the scriptures and the current context in which it is to be applied. Music is enhanced by a pipe organ and keyboard. Sunday School learning opportunities are offered for all ages and interests. We value education and learning. We have a strong interest in understanding our Christianity. We believe that we are loved by God and share a common purpose of experiencing and sharing God's love.

Within our congregation we share that love by: Worshiping together, learning together, caring for each other, and respecting one another. We enjoy being together. (A valued expression of this enjoyment was communicated by one of our senior members, who said, "There isn't anyone here that I don't like!") Our caring for and enjoying one another is expressed in several concrete ways. We have established a coffee and refreshment time after our Sunday worship service. This "social" time offers opportunities for sharing our life stories. Much of the caring (visitation and support) work in our church is carried out by the congregation. Current church staff consists of: The Minister (half time), a Music Director, an Organist, an Office Manager, and a Building Maintenance Person.

Values

Approximately twenty years ago, our congregation completed a process that resulted in a decision to adopt the following values. The values guide our thinking and deliberation at

congregational meetings and are applied to inform our relationships with each other. A statement of the values and a brief description of each follows.

We value Community: Community means that, as individuals, we are connected to one another. A community is a safe place to affirm, support and challenge one another. Communities are connected “vertically” to God and “horizontally” to one another.

We value Soul Freedom: Individuals are empowered by God (through various means such as the Bible, discussion, prayer, etc.) to discern and live out beliefs within the community. These beliefs will work themselves out in certain ways of living, and we affirm these processes. Each member of the community takes care not only to affirm his/her own freedom, but that of others as well.

We value Worship: The purposes of both corporate and individual worship are to celebrate God and gain strength and insight for daily living. We worship both as a community of faith and as individuals within this community. Resources of prayer, the Bible, other written materials, and the spoken and sung word enrich our worship of God.

We value the Spiritual Journey: We are connected to God and one another through various means such as thoughtful contemplation, times of quietness and prayer, as well as times of learning and discussion. Growth along a spiritual journey will mean change in the ways we understand and live our faith. There is a place in our spiritual journey for questions and mystery.

We value Inclusiveness: As individuals and community we value inclusiveness by showing respect and consideration for all. We learn about others through the discipline of listening. We

also practice hospitality by welcoming newcomers into our midst and attempting to form meaningful relationships with them.

What We Do

We also have a strong commitment to sharing our experience of God's love in the larger community and world. We have underused space in our building. We have come to realize that this is an asset. The central location of our church offers many opportunities for sharing our facilities with the La Crosse community. Organizations that have shared and/or continue to share our space include: Alcoholics Anonymous, the New Horizons Women's Shelter, the YWCA, the La Crosse Area Retired Teachers Association, the La Crosse Warming Center, El Centro Latino, and the La Crosse Free Legal Clinic. The following brief explanations of ongoing service to the community illustrate how we function as a congregation.

The Free Legal Clinic was started when an attorney in our congregation saw the need for legal advice for low income and disadvantaged citizens. After receiving support from the local La Crosse County Bar Association, he brought the idea to the congregation members and the minister. The idea received enthusiastic support from our quarterly meeting. The Free Legal Clinic meets on the third Wednesday evening every month, and has been ongoing, without interruption, since September of 2006.

The La Crosse Warming Center came about through a similar process. It gets cold in Wisconsin between November and March. (This is not a well kept secret.) Several of our

members noticed an article in the local newspaper. The article reported that Lutheran Social Services (LSS) was attempting to find a location to open a place where people without shelter could stay warm overnight. The article reported that LSS had initially secured a downtown property, but the landlord had turned down their offer at the last minute. Several members who had read the article contacted each other to consider the possibility of offering our space. The idea was shared with our minister and the congregation. We invited an LSS representative to visit our building to determine if the location and space were suitable. We presented the idea of housing the center at our quarterly congregational meeting. The initial response was not universally positive. By carefully explaining the opportunity the warming center presented, we were able to gain a consensus that we should host the center. The consensus was that, while we held varying degrees of support for the project, we could at least, all of us, live with it for one year. The project required city building permits for modification of our building, and modifications were made. The operation of the center became a collaborative project of First Baptist Church, Lutheran Social Services, and the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration of the Catholic Diocese of La Crosse. The center was staffed with volunteers from many organizations and churches from the area. The Warming Center was housed in our building for four winters, until the needs for space and services exceeded our capacity.

El Centro Latino found our church after the Warming Center had moved to a larger facility. In this instance “the Sisters” (Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration) were engaged in projects to support Latino members of La Crosse and surrounding communities. They were looking for accessible space to provide legal assistance, language learning opportunities and

other support services. El Centro Latino celebrated its fifth anniversary at First Baptist Church in the fall of 2019.

New Horizons Shelter The administrative offices and support center is located next door to our church. The Center supports individuals and families who have experienced domestic violence and sexual abuse. New Horizons staff and clients meet in our building during the week for a variety of program activities, and support groups. They hold training sessions for their volunteers and hold their annual appreciation banquet in our fellowship hall.

Other Community Involvement

Monday's Meal On ten Mondays each year we prepare and serve a free community meal for between 100 and 160 guests. It is typical for our small congregation to have fifteen or more workers participating in preparing, serving, and cleaning-up for these events, held at Trinity Lutheran Church on the North side of the city.

Mobile Meals is another La Crosse community program in which First Baptist Church participates. We deliver meals to local residences for four weeks each year.

Hunger Programs. We are connected with the local hunger programs in two ways. Our congregation members collect food for the WAFER program one Sunday each month. We also connect with the Hunger Task Force by using their food resources when we prepare Monday's Meal.

While having many congregation members who are “older” could be seen as a limiting factor, we choose to take a more positive view. As a result of our “seniority” some of us who are retired are more available to participate in these projects.

Mission Giving. Our focus on local projects has not occurred at the expense of regional and global giving. The mission donations of our small congregation is consistently near the top in the state-wide region.

Other Assets

Members and friends of First Baptist Church of La Crosse have an exceptional record of financial support for their church. Through responsible financial management we have been able to meet our ongoing obligations and to put aside a small fund for contingency matters. (See Attachment C.)

Facilities

We consider our church building and location as important assets. Our building, while more than a half century old, is attractive and requires below average maintenance. Essential spaces and services are accessible to persons with handicapping conditions. The pipe organ and beautiful sanctuary enhance our worship. A large vestibule provides space for our fellowship time that follows Sunday worship. There is a well appointed kitchen. Other parts of the building provide space for education, fellowship meals, recreation, celebrations and other

activities. The significance of our location is apparent as we recall the community services we have been able to both participate in and to host .

How We Are Organized

We have made significant changes in how we are organized and function in the last 15 years. With the leadership of our minister and talented members of our congregation, we addressed the task of right sizing our structure. One of the things we found was that we needed to create a structure that would allow us to "get out of our own way". We wanted all of our members (and non-members) to feel that they could participate and share their ideas. A brief description of our current structure follows:

We have Two Teams: Each team has three members, with one member being designated as team leader. The primary responsibilities of the **Inside Mission Team** include: Worship and Music, Care for One Another, and Education and Learning.

The responsibilities of the **Outside Mission Team** include: Outreach, Community Service, and Resource Management.

Teams meet at least once per quarter or as needed. The minister participates in the meetings of both teams. A Communication Coordinator attends the meetings of both teams and shares information between teams and with the congregation.

Quarterly congregational meetings are preceded by a light luncheon and typically include; informal reports from each of the mission teams, discussion of team reports and opportunities

for participants to share ideas. Quarterly congregational meetings help to keep everyone up-to-date on church activities. Team leaders alternate leading quarterly congregational meetings.

An Annual meeting in January is more formal and structured. The annual meeting includes presentation of written reports, adoption of a budget, and selection of team members.

Our Future

Our congregation, which was founded in 1852, has been larger, (and some might say more successful) in the past. We have at times been inclined to be discouraged that our church was not “growing”. More recently many of us have contemplated the possibility that we *have* been growing in very important ways. It is encouraging to note that we need more members not primarily to have a bigger church, but because we see more opportunities . We need younger members not only to have a bigger Sunday School, but so that we can insure that the values, beliefs and work of our church will continue.

The Minister We Are Seeking

The following are some of the characteristics and skills that we believe will contribute to a good fit. We have attempted to describe ourselves as a congregation in this statement. We are very aware that effective pastoral leadership has been essential to our work and the growth we have experienced. Deliberations of the Pastoral Search Committee resulted in the following statement of values, qualities and skills we are seeking. Our values provide a good starting

place. We need a minister who shares our values. The description of our congregation suggests that we would be well served by a pastor who was comfortable working collaboratively with congregational leadership. Because we have strong leadership, we need a pastor who is confident. It is important that he or she not be intimidated by strong people or conflicting ideas. We value learning and want to continue to develop a deeper understanding of the scriptures as they apply to our lives. It is important that our minister is able to support our learning and growth in faith and understanding. Because we believe that the Christian faith requires that we apply our faith in the community, we need a pastor who is skilled at , and wants to be involved in, community activities and services. Our congregation has learned to embrace diversity. Many of our members value inclusive language and sexual and gender equality. We are however probably on a continuum on these and other issues. We need a minister who is able to guide us toward a deeper understanding of these issues. Finally because we because we are a small congregation we need a minister who will help us to grow.

We have had many opportunities to think about the need for our church to grow over the past few years. It has been tempting to think of our growth in terms of our survival. We have more recently begun to think about growth more productively. We continue to believe that it is essential that we grow. Two reasons for our continued growth have become salient. Firstly, we want/need to grow because we need more workers. We have more to do both inside our church community and in the outside community than we can do. We need help. Secondly, we are deeply aware of the long history of our church in the La Crosse community. We need to attract people (particularly younger people) who can continue this legacy of service to the community.