

Webster Groves Christian Church Dreams of a Future

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2016 NBA Incubate SENT Seminar Participant



Aware of long-term decline in church participation, Webster Groves Christian Church recently engaged with Hope Partnership for Missional Transformation to clarify “why” it will exist in the future. As part of this process, members of the congregation interviewed community members and leaders and gathered data on the needs and concerns of their wider community.

From the findings emerged strong themes regarding the needs of children for education, intergenerational participation, and economic, social, and emotional wellbeing. The congregation began to imagine future stories of its life and ministry, and to discern a fundamental mission: *To follow the teachings of Jesus and sacrificially serve the people who are most marginalized.*

Key community needs and issues, identified by the work of the Ferguson Commission, were used as guidelines for considering the congregation’s ministry through a lens of racial equity. Integration of information from community interviews and research, the congregations’ roundtable conversations about its future, and data and information about the resources and needs of its community led to a statement about “what” the congregation could do to live its mission more fully: *Engaging our resources, including our building, to partner with others to increase and improve access to early childhood care and education for the most marginalized children and their families in our community.*

In exploring possibilities for partnerships, representatives of the congregation were recently fortunate to be able to participate in a seminar designed by the NBA Incubate Initiative to equip social entrepreneurs for leadership and change. Here we gained invaluable access to leadership coaching and legal, marketing, and fundraising expertise specific to nonprofits.

WGCC’s exploration of a local school district partnership is taking exciting turns and could yet go in various directions, but three characteristics of a possible community partnership are emerging:

- 1. The WGCC educational building would be used for some form of early childhood and community-based children and family programming.**

Possible programs include early childhood education through preschool classrooms, Parents as Teachers Initiatives, community summer education and social enrichment to help alleviate the opportunity gap, and Parent and Family social and educational support partnerships.

In addition to reading to children in a local Head Start program, the congregation is currently providing food each week for 15 families with children who previously returned to food-insecure homes, via a Nutrition on Weekends (NOW) program.

2. Programs would be supported by community partnerships and fundraising.

Our congregation is working with community members to identify partnerships and grant opportunities to help fund the building use and programming we are beginning to envision. WGCC sponsors an annual golf tournament fundraiser, and we are exploring ways to expand this event to help support the work we are imagining as we engage with families in our community. Current conversation and planning partners include our local school district, parent educators, representatives of other congregations, and community leaders.

3. An enduring organization would be created to maintain an area early childhood promise—no child will be denied their full developmental potential due to poverty and inadequate learning opportunities.

With the help and encouragement of NBA and its partners, we are exploring ways to structure our initiatives so that they are effective, broadly based, and adaptable.

Though there are still many details to consider and connections to be made, Webster Groves Christian Church continues to be excited by our vision of partnering with our community and fully living our fundamental mission.

The NBA incubates new ministries, supporting social entrepreneurs of faith who are serving their communities in a variety of innovative ways and empowering these Disciples-led health and social service projects to focus on growth, impact, and sustainability. Learn more at nbacares.org/incubate or by contacting Rev. Ayanna Johnson Watkins, Director of the NBA Incubate Initiative, at awatkins@nbacares.org.