NACOOCHEE
Presbyterian Church
Mission Study Report

Sautee Nacoochee, Georgia
February 2023

About This Report

We've created this profile of Nacoochee Presbyterian Church for anyone who wants to learn more about us. It tells the story of how we came to be who we are…. how we have stood strong since 1870, by the grace of God and on the shoulders of many ancestors. It also tells the story of where we want to go as a congregation seeking to do God's will in today's world.

We've included our demographics and financial status, as well as results of a recent mission study to identify the congregation's vision for our future. We've also added some basic information about the lovely community we call home.

Our goal is to tell the story of a church in transition—a financially healthy, courageous church, yes, but a church facing challenging questions about our future.

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Introduction: A Blend of History and Progress

In the foothills of the Appalachian mountains, you'll find a steepled, white clapboard structure surrounded by rolling pastureland. It's almost a stereotypical view of an old-fashioned country church, but looks can be deceiving.

With 260+ members, Nacoochee Presbyterian Church (NPC) is one of the largest churches in the Northeast Georgia Presbytery of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

> And though our church is situated in a rural setting …
>
> With a churchyard gate fashioned out of old buggy wheel rims …
>
> A sanctuary built in 1927 …
>
> And pews crafted by a team of local men nearly 100 years ago …
>
> We are known as one of the most progressive congregations in our community … and our denomination.

Distinctive, outspoken, courageous

Our home county—White County, Georgia—is one of the most conservative in the nation, yet our views don't always mirror those of our neighbors. You might say that we're an anomaly. We humbly embrace that distinction.

We also wholeheartedly support the policies of inclusion adopted by the PC(USA) in the new millennium—policies that show an encouraging evolution in our denomination.

It's not an overstatement to say that NPC has been at the forefront of that evolution.

While we have members from across the political spectrum, we are known for our outspoken support of the rights of everyone to live and worship freely. Indeed, all are welcome here.

As our mission statement says:

The mission of Nacoochee Presbyterian Church, in communion with God and the Holy Spirit, is to show in word and deed the life and love of Jesus Christ. We celebrate the diversity of God's creation as we seek to be an inclusive Christian family devoted to worship, prayer, justice, peace, nurture, fellowship and stewardship of all God's gifts.

A Beautiful Setting, A Thriving Community

Nacoochee Presbyterian is a rural church, meaning we are not located within the city limits of any of the surrounding small towns, but they are not very far away and most of the people in the area live outside of the towns in residential communities that are nestled into the beautiful Northeast Georgia Mountains.

The four primary cities near the church are Clarkesville (11.3 miles away, population 1,748, the seat of Habersham County), Cleveland (9.7 miles away, population 3,983, the seat of White County), Demorest (14.2 miles away, population 2,247, home of Piedmont University) and Helen (4.5 miles away, population 546, a tourist town that bills itself as an Alpine Village).

Two other nearby residential communities are Yonah Mountain (7.9 miles away), adjacent to Yonah Mountain Vineyards and Serenity Cellars, with hiking trails nearby; and Skylake (3.0 miles away), a gated community of 450 homes sitting on 1,350 wooded acres with 350 acres of common green space and hiking trails on the property.

These communities lie within two counties: Habersham County (population 46,774) and White County (population 28,442).

The city of Gainesville is 35 miles south/southwest and the city of Athens is 68 miles south/southeast. The Atlanta airport, Asheville, NC, and Greenville, SC, are all two hours away.

The church sits in the heart of the Sautee and Nacoochee valleys, in the middle of the Sautee Valley Historic District, and across the street from the Sautee Nacoochee Community Center, home to a nationally acclaimed Folk Pottery Museum. The Center is home to a local history museum, heritage site, native peace garden, and spaces for performing and visual arts; it holds classes and workshops for adults and youth. Many community activities occur regularly.

Nearby is the historic Old Sautee Store, ca. 1872, the Hardman Farm Historic site, ca. 1870, the historic Nacoochee Indian Mound, Smithgall Woods State Park, Unicoi State Park and Anna Ruby Falls. There are 12 State Parks within a 50-mile radius of the church and much of the area lies on state and national forest land. The Appalachian Trail passes nearby and both the Chattahoochee and Soque Rivers flow through the area.

Indeed, it's a pastoral spot. The Sautee and Nacoochee valleys have long attracted artists, musicians, writers, hippies and other non-comformists attracted to the area's scenic beauty and relaxed pace. Others come to escape the Atlanta traffic, or find a quieter place to raise a family. But there are other attributes that add to the quality of life here.

Healthcare

Demorest is the major center for healthcare in the area and many of the medical offices are affiliated with major providers and hospitals in Gainesville. Habersham Medical Center (HMC), founded in 1952, has 40 physicians and over 700 employees providing general and specialized hospital services. It has been named in the Georgia Hospital Association's Circle of Excellence and was ranked in the top 10 percent of U.S. hospitals for stroke care by *US News and World Report.* In July 2023, HMC will join the Northeast Georgia Health System under the governance of the Hospital Authority of Hall County & the City of Gainesville.

Education

Just down the road is Piedmont University in Demorest. Founded in 1897 and serving over 2,500 students, the university offers more than 50 undergraduate and graduate programs in the schools of Arts & Sciences, Business, Education, and Nursing & Health Sciences. The university offers many art and musical performances that are open to the public.

In White County, there are seven public schools serving 6,145 students and one private school serving 47 students. The top-ranked public schools are Mount Yonah Elementary School, Jack P. Nix Elementary School, and White County High School. The public schools have an average math proficiency score of 53% (versus the Georgia public school average of 44%), and reading proficiency score of 52% (versus the 45% statewide average). The schools have an average ranking of 9/10, which is in the top 20% of Georgia public schools. Minority enrollment is 17% of the student body (primarily Hispanic).

In Habersham County, there are 13 public schools serving 6,496 students and four private schools serving 1,189 students. The top-ranked public schools are Demorest Elementary School, Hazel Grove Elementary School, and North Habersham Middle School. The public schools have an average math proficiency score of 55% (versus the Georgia public school average of 44%), and reading proficiency score of 48% (versus the 45% statewide average). The schools have an average ranking of 9/10, which is in the top 20% of Georgia public schools. Minority enrollment is 38% of the student body (primarily Hispanic).

Politically speaking

This area is very conservative. In the 2020 elections, the voting results in White County were Republican: 82.49%; Democrat: 16.27%; and Libertarian: 1.24%. In Habersham County, the results were Republican: 81.43%; Democrat: 17.44%; and Libertarian: 1.14%. Nacoochee Presbyterian is known in the community for its liberal stance.

However, we are a very open and accepting church and we have members from across the political spectrum. We support the rights of everyone to live and worship freely and all are welcome here. We have lost a few members in recent years, but due to their choice to disassociate for their own personal reasons. We still consider them our friends, would be happy for them to return, and would welcome them with open arms.

Our pastor's invitation to share in Holy Communion says,

> "You do not have to be a member of this church to come to this table. You do not have to be a Presbyterian. You do not have to be certain of all you think and believe to come to this table; but, if you hunger for the love of God as embodied in Jesus Christ, you are welcome at this table. Come as you are; come as you will."

The same invitation applies to all of the church's worship services and other events.

Local religious data

You can see in the following chart that, of those county residents who say they are religious, only a small percentage identify as Presbyterian—approximately 1,400 people. NPC is one of six Presbyterian churches in the area.

Religion	In White County, GA 39.5% of the people claim to be religious	In Habersham County, GA 64.0% of the people claim to be religious
Baptist	17.0%	35.7%
Episcopalian	0.7%	0.7%
Catholic	5.7%	7.2%
Lutheran	0.3%	0.0%
Methodist	6.3%	5.1%
Pentecostal	2.6%	5.8%
Presbyterian	**2.3%**	**1.6%**
Church of Jesus Christ	0.0%	1.5%
Another Christian faith	4.6%	6.4%
Judaism	0.0%	0.0%
An eastern faith	0.0%	0.0%
Affiliates with Islam	0.0%	0.0%

White County

Population: 28,000+/-
Number of Presbyterians: 649
Number of Presbyterian Churches: 3; Cleveland, Helen, and NPC

Habersham County

Population: 43,000+/-
Number of Presbyterians: 746
Number of Presbyterian Churches: 3; 1 in Cornelia and 2 in Clarkesville

Membership, Attendance and Leadership

Member profile

Of the 1,395 persons who say they are Presbyterian in White and Habersham Counties, 260+ of them are members of NPC. Approximately 59% of our members live in White County; 26% live in Habersham County; and the rest of us live in 12 counties spread all over NE Georgia, including a few members who live in metro Atlanta.

We are an older congregation—87% of us are 55+, which reflects that Sautee Nacoochee is a desirable escape from nearby metro areas and also a retirement haven. Some of our members have second homes here and many plan to retire here or have already retired here.

Here is a look at our NPC's demographic profile compared with that of our surrounding communities.

	White County	Habersham County	Sautee Nacoochee	Nacoochee Pres. Church
Population	27,144	43.041	4,069	260± Members
Persons under 5 years	4.7%	5.5%	3.7%	1.0% (age 0-18)
Persons under 18 years	19.6%	22.2%	15.2%	
Persons 19 to 64	53%	53.9%	55.7%	23%
Persons 65+	22.7%	18.4%	25.4%	76%
Median Age of all Persons	52	45	59	72
Females / Males	51% / 49%	52% / 48%	53% / 47%	64% / 36%
White	91.7%	75.6%	36%	99.6%
Black	2.1%	3.9%	58.7%	0.4%
American Indian	0.6%	1.1%	0.0%	0.0%
Asian	0.6%	2.3%	0.7%	0.0%
Hispanic / Latino	3.6%	16.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Housing Units	13,719	18,635	3,049	159 Households
Owner Occupied	77.5%	77.8%	90.5%	no data
Households with Children	29.3%	28.6%	10.3%	15%
Households without Children	70.7%	71.4%	89.7%	85%
High School Graduates percent of persons age 25+	85.2%	80.5%	72.5%	99%
Bachelor's Degree or Higher percent of persons age 25+	21.8%	23.3%	50.4%	84%
Median Household Income	$64,729	$56,680	$55,000	$80,000

Median US Age:	38.5
Median Age in Georgia:	36.3
Median US Household Income:	$70,784
Median GA Household Income:	$65,030

What the numbers don't speak to is our long-standing relationship with minority members of our community. For many years, we have offered Convivio gatherings to our Latino friends and neighbors, including meals, monthly Bible study and fellowship. The nearby Bean Creek Missionary Baptist Church serves African American neighbors and has long been an ally of NPC. While our membership is almost completely white today, we continue our outreach programs and hope our membership rolls will soon reflect more accurately our area's demographic profile.

Sadly, we have lost over 12% of our members in the past three years, some passing away (fortunately none due to Covid) and some moving away. In addition, we recently updated our membership roll. We have always considered anyone a member who wanted to be included, but the result was to carry many people on our membership roll who were not really active members of the church. We have pared that down, but we still maintain a contact list that is much larger than our member list. We include anyone who wishes to stay in touch with us.

Not meeting in person has made it difficult to grow our membership, but there have been several new visitors in recent months, some of whom "found" us on the Internet. Perhaps the pandemic, which forced us to begin streaming services, had the benefit of making us reach out in a way we had never done before and reach people we otherwise would not have reached.

Attendance

Like most churches, we saw greatly distorted attendance records during the pandemic, yet we are getting closer to the level of in-church attendance that we had before everything shut down in March 2020. Current attendance averages about 85 people in the sanctuary for the Sunday service and 30-40 viewing the simultaneous live stream via YouTube from home or elsewhere. We have 172 YouTube subscribers and each worship service is viewed 45 to 75 times.

Church services were held at 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. prior to the pandemic, but when it hit, we closed the sanctuary to group gatherings on Sunday mornings and aired recorded services on YouTube. Once the pandemic abated, we began holding one 10:00 a.m. service in the sanctuary and invited all to attend. If attendance eventually recovers to pre-pandemic levels, we will consider adding a second service to accommodate more people. A time for fellowship is held following the services, where we offer coffee and light refreshments.

Other worship opportunities include prayer groups, a woman's spirituality group, men's breakfast group, mission trips and other volunteer and outreach opportunities. And from October through February we hold a monthly Taizé service led by the NPC Music Director who is often joined by musicians from the community to provide the meditative music for this reverent time of worship.

We also hold Sunday school classes for children in grades 1-5, and youth in grades 6-12. We provide a nursery for infants and toddlers. Children and youth participate in the church service until "The Word with the Children," a child-friendly short sermon usually delivered by the pastor and enjoyed by children AND adults. The children and youth then go to their respective Sunday school classes for the remainder of the service. Older youth also attend youth ministry partnerships monthly with youth from other churches.

Church staff

On June 13, 2021, Pastor Robert W. Prim announced his retirement effective December 31, 2021. It was a sad time for our church as Bob and his family had been very important to the life and ministry of NPC for 24 years. Finding his replacement is one of our biggest challenges at the moment.

Following his retirement, (complete with an exuberant and sometimes tearful retirement party), NPC began a new chapter led by the Session, the Presbytery, and others. On December 27, 2021, the Session approved the selection of Reverend Teresa Franklin as Interim Pastor, to begin her active ministry March 1, 2022. Rev. Franklin was no stranger to NPC, having been ordained in our church in February 2010.

Since Rev. Franklin began work as our Interim Pastor, she has been skillfully leading our congregation in the steps we need to select a permanent pastor, as well as providing a strong and steady presence in the pulpit. She is assisted in ministry by Joy White Pruett, Parish Associate Emeritus, and Barry Whittemore, Parish Affiliate.

Full-time Music Director Barbara Luhn leads an inspiring music program including weekly choral anthems, a Taizé service, and voice and instrumental performances by members and guests. The music program also includes a Handbell Choir, led by volunteer director Clarissa Evans.

Other staff includes a part-time Office Administrator and a childcare provider for the nursery.

Leadership

The church is governed by a Session of nine Elders who meet monthly. Elders are elected for three-year terms. Also attending meetings with Elders are the Clerk of Session, Treasurer, Deacon Coordinator, and Pastor/Moderator. Elders chair the following committees:

Christian Education Committee

This position consists of 2 Elders as co-chairs. The Christian Education Committee provides leadership in planning, developing. organizing, and implementing educational activities for all ages with a goal of encouraging and supporting personal development and growth in faith. Responsibilities include:

1. Coordinating Sunday school teachers
2. Planning teaching curriculum
3. Teaching Sunday school
4. Coordinating youth events
5. Planning and staffing Vacation Bible School
6. Planning and fundraising for youth mission trips
7. Community outreach to families with children
8. Nursery care for infants and toddlers during worship services
9. Coordinating adult education programs
10. Background checks for volunteers
11. Liability training

Communications Committee

The Communications Committee oversees NPC's communication projects among the membership and our surrounding communities. Responsibilities include:

1. Producing a monthly online newsletter
2. Maintaining and updating the church website
3. Updating the church email list
4. Sending news of events or special services via group emails
5. Maintaining bulletin boards
6. Updating and publishing a church membership directory

Fellowship Committee

The Fellowship Committee meets as needed and organizes, coordinates, and promotes social events and opportunities for members and friends of NPC. Responsibilities include:

1. Sunday fellowship
2. Special events (potlucks on 5th Sundays, special fellowship gatherings)
3. Arranging food for funeral/memorial services, including setup and cleanup
4. Recruiting volunteers
5. Organizing kitchen and ordering supplies
6. Providing newsletter articles about fellowship opportunities.
7. Activities in collaboration with other churches or community groups

Finance Committee

The Finance Committee meets monthly. Their primary role is the preparation and monitoring of NPC's general fund (operating) budget. Responsibilities include:

1. Prepare yearly budget
2. Communicate with church treasurer weekly
3. Review expenses and fund requests
4. Review gifts
5. Conduct annual financial reviews
6. Negotiate debt obligations
7. Maintain NPC accounting manual
8. Insurance coverage

Outreach Committee

The Outreach Committee leads the NPC congregation in responding to needs in the local community and throughout the world. They meet as needed. Responsibilities include:

1. Benevolence to persons needing immediate financial assistance
2. Mam/Guatemalan mission work
3. Maintaining food pantry
4. Christmas giving for those in need
5. Contributions to national and international assistance organizations
6. Convivio: monthly Bible study and fellowship for the Hispanic community
7. "Family Promise" aid to families in housing transition
8. Palestinian Olive Oil Ministry/sales to help farmers and families
9. Environmental issues
10. Other outreach projects as needed

Personnel Committee

The Personnel Committee is responsible for:

1. Developing and maintaining job descriptions for all staff
2. Annual reviews
3. Pay recommendations
4. Background checks
5. Conducting interviews, checking references and making hiring recommendations

Property Committee

The Property Committee maintains and enhances the building and grounds of NPC. Individuals volunteer time and skills to building upkeep and grounds maintenance, including the memorial garden. The committee also anticipates future property needs, participates in expansion and renovation efforts and makes appropriate recommendations to the Session. The committee meets as needed.

Worship Committee

The Worship Committee meets every other month and is responsible for:

1. Coordinating worship service with the pastor
2. Recruiting lectors, ushers, communion servers, and flower providers
3. Maintaining church information forms and visitor cards in pews
4. Revising the Bulletin as needed
5. Maintaining and selecting pew Bibles
6. Recommending dates for communion and anticipating needs for special services

Congregational Care Deacons

As part of NPC's nurture ministry, nine Deacons reach out to members to assess their needs. Deacons, who are elected by the congregation for three-year terms, are assigned approximately twenty church members or family groups. The Deacons stay in contact via email, cards, phone calls, or visits as needed. This contact proved invaluable during the Covid-19 pandemic as church services were online and in person contact was disrupted. Deacons meet every other month. A Deacon Coordinator keeps the group updated about member needs.

Duties include:

1. Maintaining contact with assigned members and updating them on church news
2. Ascertaining if they have any special needs that the church or pastor needs to address
3. Coordinating meals for members if needed after surgery, illness or another event
4. Helping arrange for transportation if needed for doctor visits, treatments, etc.
5. Contacting new members to make sure they receive their new member information and complete their biography and participation form.

Financial Data

NPC does not ask its members to make pledges. We have always believed that our members will give as they are led to give and as they can and will. We have never had money problems. Our budget is based on historical data and the desires of our members to provide certain ministries. Whenever there is a need, we let the congregation know and it is met.

It has worked that way the last 25 years if not longer. It's another thing that makes NPC unique.

Expected contributions for 2023 are $290,601, forming the basis for this year's budget. Expenses for 2022 were $236,952 with $277,616 in contributions.

Expenses were down for 2022 because we were without a pastor for two months. Also, our Interim Pastor was covered under her spouse's health insurance. (Health insurance was provided for our previous full-time pastor.) The 2023 budget has been adjusted for inflation, payroll, property needs, an endowment reinstatement, and expenses related to pastor search and relocation. Also, pay was increased to follow the NEGA Presbytery's decision to raise its salaries to follow the federal government adjustment to Social Security.

Cash on hand as of December 31, 2022:
Total $224,567

Designated	$141,336	63% of Total Funds
General Operating	$63,554	28% of total funds
Undesignated	$19,677	9% of Total Funds

A large portion of the 2023 budget goes for payroll and benefits. Our total payroll for 2023 will be $161,482, which is 55.6% of our budget. Pay and benefits for our staff are:

Pastor (interim, full time)	$89,963
Music Director/Pianist (full time)	$37,528
Office Administrator (part time, 20 hours weekly)	$24,960
Nursery childcare provider (1099 payee)	$ 2,120

Contribution Trends

As you can see in the following chart, annual contributions declined during 2020, the first year of the pandemic, but increased steadily in 2021 and 2022 toward pre-pandemic levels.

It should be noted that for the years 2019-2021, the congregation gave an additional $140,000 per year towards the Capital Campaign for new construction. In addition to regular giving during this challenging time, our members paid off a $600,000 PILP loan for building expansion. Taken out in 2017 and due in January 2040, the loan was paid off in February 2022—18 years before it was due. That was cause for celebration!

These substantial contributions combined with regular giving averaged $426,234 per year, which is $2,681/household. Total giving was approximately 2.64% of household income.

Source	2019	2020	2021	2022
Revenues				
Contributions	299,189.89	272,215.62	275,940.47	277,616.06
Other Income	599.94	786.19	247.10	34.85
Total Income	**299,789.83**	**273,001.81**	**276,187.57**	**277,650.91**
Expenses/Actual				
Christian Education	379.76	804.49	709.60	1,454.23
Fellowship	1,170.56	138.27	0.00	1,942.50
Property	19,230.91	21,560.15	17,963.72	24,083.99
Communications	5,118.10	908.13	1,801.87	1,583.65
Worship	3,696.56	13,966.47	17,974.84	14,839.22
Outreach/P & J	4,258.97	8,923.26	7,396.79	7,890.09
Presbytery	27,359.16	27,698.85	23,038.13	22,627.49
Office Expenses	4,918.24	3,875.71	3,464.01	6,006.11
Payroll and Benefits	214,878.01	190,942.21	187,142.10	139,461.98
Cleaning	6,060.00	5,060.00	6,380.00	5,647.91
Utilities	7,163.92	5,446.17	5,120.36	4,914.68
Session	1,545.99	483.87	1,009.90	5,173.00
Bank Charges	106.44	1,307.46	1,566.63	1,327.75
Total Expense	**295,886.62**	**281,115.04**	**273,568.03**	**236,952.30**
Net Income	**3,903.21**	**-8,113.23**	**2,619.54**	**40,698.61**

Source	2019	2020	2021	2022
ACCOUNTS: Checking/Savings				
UCB Operating *	73,158.52	63,306.03	71,759.97	108,332.97
UCB PDF**	5,927.26	4,881.69	0.00	0.00
Schwab-Operating	75,028.61	78,731.48	134,292.61	113,598.59
Pres Mission Exc.	844.94	9,979.43	6,377.50	2,635.00
Pres Investment	30,994.98	31,514.45	31,746.20	0.00
Undesignated Operating	36,433.01	22,567.86	29,284.36	63,553.96
Undesignated - PPP	0.00	0.00	32,700.00	0.00
Capital Campaign	16,899.38	16,614.77	36,436.38	0.00
Other Designated	132,581.92	149,230.45	145,755.54	161,012.60
Total	**185,914.31**	**188,413.08**	**244,176.28**	**224,566.56**

* UCB: United Community Bank **PDF: Pastor's Discretionary Fund

The Story of Nacoochee Presbyterian Church

A struggle to survive in the early years

The beginnings of Nacoochee Presbyterian Church can be traced back to 1869, when Captain James H. Nichols and his family settled in Nacoochee Valley. A devout Presbyterian, Captain Nichols succeeded in forming a Presbyterian congregation within a year of his arrival. Two years later, he built a church building on a crescent-shaped hillside adjacent to his home.

The original congregation consisted of Captain Nichols, his family and a few neighbors. Several families of Nichols' former slaves who had remained after emancipation joined in worship services.

The regional Presbytery entered Nacoochee Presbyterian Church onto its rolls in 1870 and assigned Joseph Washburn as the first minister. Washburn had served in the Confederate States Army from 1861 to 1865. After the war, he attended Columbia Theological Seminary and then came to Nacoochee in 1874. He was pastor of NPC for two years.

The following decades saw the church struggling to survive—and to hold on to pastors in its remote location. Several pastors came and went, and did their best to keep the church alive. But by 1898, Nacoochee and three other northeast Georgia Presbyterian churches had a total combined membership of only 41 members.

In the midst of this struggle, the Presbytery dissolved NPC. Then in 1901, a revival service rejuvenated the membership and the Presbytery recognized a newly reorganized Nacoochee Presbyterian Church, assigning David J. Blackwell as pastor.

Mr. Blackwell was instrumental in bringing about another change to the persevering congregation that had profound effects on the entire community. In 1902, the Methodist Jesse R. Lumsden made an oft-quoted statement to Blackwell, "If you Presbyterians will establish a school here, we will give you our school building and four acres of land connected with it." NPC members embraced the idea and submitted a proposal to the Presbytery that won its approval.

The opening of the Institute gave new life to NPC

Nacoochee Institute opened its doors in November 1903. As Nacoochee Institute grew over the next 23 years, NPC grew with it. So intertwined were the school and the church that the congregation began to worship at the school's facility. Services were no longer held at the original NPC building and that property reverted back to the Nichols estate in 1920. It is used today as a Baptist church.

Nacoochee Institute was a godsend to the valley community and to hundreds of children who would otherwise have had no opportunity for a quality education. The leaders emphasized academics along with spiritual growth as evidenced by a curriculum that included yearly Bible classes, Latin, Greek, French, algebra and the arts.

So popular was the school throughout Georgia that the statewide Synod took over support in 1917. For many years congregations throughout Georgia celebrated "Nacoochee Sunday" in which they took a special offering for the Institute. The Women's Auxiliary of the church was very active in supporting the Institute with money for scholarships and with favorable promotion throughout the Synod. A trademark of the school was its service to the larger community. There was constant outreach for improving farming and housing as well as for education, religious instruction and health. Nacoochee Institute was recognized for its help during the 1918 flu epidemic.

By 1925, the Institute had experienced tremendous growth. It owned 301 acres of land upon which were located three school buildings, four dormitories, eight cottage homes, and 16 farm and service buildings A total of 14 teachers taught an enrolled 262 students.

Fire brings an end and a new beginning

On April 1, 1926, fire raced through the main building of Nacoochee Institute, completely destroying the structure. By unfortunate coincidence, another more vocationally-oriented school at Rabun Gap had burned just a few months earlier. Nacoochee Institute continued to operate but its days were numbered. The school was only able to graduate two more classes in 1927 and 1928 before it merged with the school in Rabun Gap, some 50 miles north.

Due to the fire, NPC was left without a church building, but the faithful congregation forged ahead, worshiping first in an open-sided shed for the summer of 1926 and then moving into a newly renovated dairy barn for the winter of 1927. Members began a campaign to raise their own building, soliciting funds locally and from 30 states.

The family of R.A Williams, neighboring Methodists, donated land for the church. Groundbreaking commenced on June 15, 1927. A great deal of local labor assisted with construction of the building and handcrafted pews. (Those pews are still in use today!) With much celebration, the new, debt-free building was dedicated on September 13, 1927.

The original building had a flat roof which was later changed to a gable style. A bell tower was erected years later. In 1955, construction of the Coit Memorial Annex provided an assembly room, classrooms, a kitchen and restrooms.

The 1950s were lean years once again for NPC and the congregation was served primarily by student supply pastors. In 1960, Nacoochee relinquished Church Extension support and was able to hire a full-time pastor who was not yoked to other congregations. A manse was built the following year.

A new era of growth

1981 brought Jerry Brinegar to serve at NPC. He was instrumental in attracting a number of new members throughout the 1980s. Under his leadership, the church became actively involved in issues concerning the environment and thoughtful stewardship of the earth. Rev. Brinegar served as pastor until 1988.

The growth of the congregation in the 1980s enabled the church to hire John Dale Hobbes as full-time pastor in 1988. Under his leadership, the congregation underwent a building campaign to expand the building in 1994 with an enlarged kitchen, fellowship hall and Sunday School wing and to donate one-tenth of the funds raised to the Bean Creek Missionary Baptist Church. A deck was added on each side of the fellowship hall and, using split-level construction, classrooms, bathrooms and a session room/pastor's study were added to the building.

As the PC(USA) enlarged its response to peace and justice issues, so did NPC with guidance from Rev. Hobbs. He remained as pastor until 1997 after which the congregation was once again served by a number of interim pastors.

In 1998, the congregation called Reverend Robert W. Prim who served as pastor from 1988 until his retirement in December 2021.

A vibrant ministry

During Rev. Prim's tenure, NPC programs and outreach continued to expand, including but definitely not limited to the following: Noshers (small group dinners to encourage fellowship amongst church members and friends), 5th Sunday potlucks, book clubs, annual mission trips to Guatemala, Convivio outreach gatherings to our Latino friends and neighbors, Souper Bowl of Caring Sunday fundraisers sponsored by the youth, CROSS youth mission trips, Appalachia Service Projects for youth, a *This I Believe* program during Lent of 2012, participation in Family Promise, Habitat for Humanity offerings and participation in local building projects, Blessing of the Animals service, installation of solar panels to minimize the carbon footprint of NPC, the Women's Spirituality Group, Men's Breakfast Meetings, Ladies Lunch Bunch, Fair Trade Coffee, Loaves and Fishes food pantry, Christmas Angel Tree to provide gifts and financial assistance for local families in need, and Education for Ministry.

NPC's music ministry also grew during Rev. Prim's tenure. Under Music Director Barbara Luhn's leadership, a beautiful contemplative Taize service was started in 2007. The Christmas Eve Folk Choir service was also begun in 2007 and continues to be a much-loved tradition at NPC. In 2011, a fundraising campaign was held to purchase handbells. We now have a 3-octave handbell choir which adds musical depth and beauty to many of our worship services.

Church members and guests regularly share their musical talents as part of our services, singing and providing special music on a variety of instruments, including violin, cello, oboe and harp.

Growth places new demands on NPC

Under Rev. Prim's leadership, church membership and attendance continued to increase, necessitating the addition of a second worship service in 2006. In 2009, a board of six Congregational Care Deacons was established to assist the pastor with outreach and ministry to church members.

NPC took bold stances with Rev. Prim at the helm. The church was a staunch supporter of PC(USA)'s 2011 adoption of Amendment 10-A, a change in the ordination standards to allow openly gay people to serve as leaders in the church. The church also was an advocate of changing the denomination's definition of marriage to include same-sex couples—a move that ultimately succeeded, too. Rev. Prim performed marriage ceremonies for several gay and lesbian couples who were leaders in the church.

As our congregation continued to expand, the need for change became even more pressing. Parking was limited to the small area in front of the church, or alongside the edge of the road, or across the street. Access to the sanctuary was difficult for people with mobility issues, especially during inclement weather. But we were land-locked and options were few.

Then, in April 2015, the church was able to purchase 16.8 acres of pastureland adjacent to the church using funds obtained from the sale of the manse in 2002. With the wonderful addition of this property, the ability to provide the needed changes was now possible. What's more, the purchase ensured that we would be able to protect the land from outside development and preserve our beautiful setting in the heart of the Sautee and Nacoochee valleys.

The session authorized the formation of a Vision Task Force in 2015 and work was begun to identify how to proceed with making our church more inviting and accessible to all. The task force identified two important projects: expansion of parking and handicap access. This exciting phase of growth was entitled, "*Widen the Welcome*" as we worked to "Make our space match our spirit."

The planned expansion was divided into three phases beginning with an on-site parking area, ADA-compliant ramps and bathrooms, and an additional covered entry. The second and third phases would include additional classroom space and ultimately, an enlarged sanctuary to provide additional seating. A Capital Campaign to secure financial support from the congregation was soon underway, assisted by Horizon, a church fund-raising organization. As of July 10, 2017, commitments for the Capital Campaign totaled $777,894.16.

In June of 2017, a formal contract with a local construction company was approved and signed. The work began but progress was initially slow due to frequent rain. Bit by bit, the project gained momentum and on October 28, 2018, a joyful celebration was held to mark the completion of the new parking area and church addition. Phase 1 was finally complete. In February 2022, the debt was paid off and NPC was debt free. It was a wonderful day for NPC!

Our building today widens our welcome—and honors our past

The enlarged NPC building has a total of 7,096 sq. ft., which includes a fellowship hall, kitchen, office space, Sunday school rooms, choir room, children's nursery, pastor's study, five restrooms—including one with a shower and two that are handicapped accessible—and storage space.

The landscaped grounds of the church include a memory garden, playground and picnic tables. Solar panels behind the church help reduce electricity bills. The total property owned is 17.6 acres, with most of it being adjacent pasture. And the new parking lot makes everyone's visit to the church safer and more convenient.

Yes, these were modern improvements, but the NPC building still has a strong connection to the past. You can hear it in the creak of the original hardwood floorboards in the sanctuary. See it in the majestic trees sheltering the building. Feel it in the time-worn smoothness of the hand-hewn pews. You can also spot how members and friends of NPC have left their signatures on our building and grounds in many creative ways over the decades.

For example, the iron gate located at the original entrance to the church was crafted out of old buggy wheel rims in 1927 by Simpson Logan and George Westmoreland. The pews were built by Wilburn Burke, Roy Kimberly, Garland Bristol, Lon Hood, George Westmoreland and John Sosebee in time for dedication of the building after its construction in 1927.

Preston Simmons built the pulpit while he was enrolled in the trade school in Clarkesville, with lumber donated by Florence Logan. James Hood built the Communion Table in 1980. The Celtic Cross that hangs above the pulpit was custom-made for this location and honors Dr. Austin J. Walter and Minnie Ross Walter, who spent many years supporting NPC. The cross was received by the church about a year after their deaths in the early 1980s.

Jim Johnston built the Baptismal Font and finished it just in time for the baptism of his son Hoke Johnston in July 1986. Charles Smith, a church elder, carved the small wooden crosses above the sanctuary windows. Gloria Brown designed and made the stained-glass window above the bright blue entrance doors to the building. It was dedicated in 1988.

These gifts help tell our story and make our building dear to us.

Read more at https://nacoochеepresbyterian.org/the-story-of-nacoochee-presbyterian-church/

The Mission Study Survey: A Step to the Future

After Rev. Prim's retirement, we knew we had work to do to make sure we would take the right steps forward. It was a time of introspection and discernment—and we wanted to be sure all voices were heard.

In May of 2022, the Session of Nacoochee Presbyterian Church (NPC) elected a five-member Mission Study Task Force (MSTF) to gather the collective views and vision of the NPC congregation. The stated outcome for the MSTF was to develop the Nacoochee Presbyterian Church Mission Study Report—this document outlining where we've been and where we need to go.

We needed to craft a document that gave a clear picture of our church—our traditions and our dreams for the future—to our Presbytery, our own Pastor Nominating Committee, prospective candidates for pastor and other interested parties. We think we've achieved our goal with this document you are reading now.

A diligent, thorough methodology

We started with a membership survey. The MSTF selected Holy Cow! Consulting to design and administer a Church Assessment Tool (CAT). The CAT consisted of 99 questions focusing on personal views and beliefs, priorities among goals, participation in church life, household data, transition, critical abilities, and five additional questions selected by the MSTF.

The CAT was released to the congregation on September 6, 2022, and closed on September 20, 2022. Individuals were able to complete the assessment online or on paper. 150 responses were received (125% of average worship attendance). The result is a Vital Signs document.

On October 17, 2022, the Session participated in a Zoom call with a representative of Holy Cow! Consulting to present the results, as defined in the Vital Signs report. Then the MSTF held eight Listening Sessions with the congregation. These Sessions were held in the homes of church members and at NPC. These Sessions were an opportunity for the MSTF to summarize the Vital Signs and Executive Summary documents for the congregation and to allow for additional comments to be received toward the development of the Mission Study. Approximately 60 individuals attended these Sessions.

The Vital Signs and Executive Summary documents and summaries from the Listening Sessions provided a wealth of information from the congregation of NPC about their vision for the future and their willingness to embrace it.

In short, we understand ourselves better because of this work.

The Executive Summary and a summary of the Listening Sessions follow on the next few pages.

Holy Cow! Consulting Survey Results: A Snapshot of Our Church

Executive Summary

The Congregation Assessment Tool was recently administered in your church. 335 persons were invited to participate; of these, 150 persons responded. A response from every member is not required to provide valid results. For a complete readout, please review the Vital Signs report that was sent to your church. A summary of that report is provided below.

Overall, approximately 64% of your members are clearly satisfied with things in the church. This, along with other information, indicates that the church has options which include growth, expansion, replication, and external impact. Whether any of these will be realized depends on the choices made.

Not every question is of equal importance to members. When asked how satisfied they are, members tend to focus on the issues addressed in the questions below. When they feel more positive in these areas, they tend to feel more positive overall.

- **The worship services at our church are exceptional in both quality and spiritual content.**
- **The leaders of our church show a genuine concern to know what people are thinking when decisions need to be made.**
- **Persons who serve as leaders in our church are representative of the membership.**
- **In important decisions in our church, adequate opportunity for consideration of different approaches is usually provided.**
- **The whole spirit in our congregation makes people want to get as involved as possible.**

Conversely, when your members feel less positive about the areas above, they tend to feel less satisfied with their experience in the church overall.

Every church exhibits patterns in its life that contain strengths and potential weaknesses. Your church has potential strengths related to inclusiveness and advocacy. Potential weaknesses include a tendency to intellectualize every issue and difficulty in establishing identity and vision.

As members look to the future, their top four goals are:

- **Make necessary changes to attract families with children and youth to our church.**
- **Provide more opportunities for Christian education and spiritual formation at every age and stage of life.**
- **Create more opportunities for people to form meaningful relationships (for example, small groups, nurtured friendships, shared meals, etc).**
- **Develop and implement a comprehensive strategy to reach new people and incorporate them into the life of the church.**

In comparison to other churches, three goals that are unusually strong for your church are:

- **Work as an advocate for social and institutional change so that society might better reflect the values of the kingdom of God.**
- **Expand outreach ministries that provide direct services to those living on the margins of society. (i.e. homeless, immigrant, transient persons)**
- **Work to renew and revitalize the community around the church by building coalitions with partners that share this vision and commitment.**

These may warrant attention from the leadership even if they are mid-level priorities.

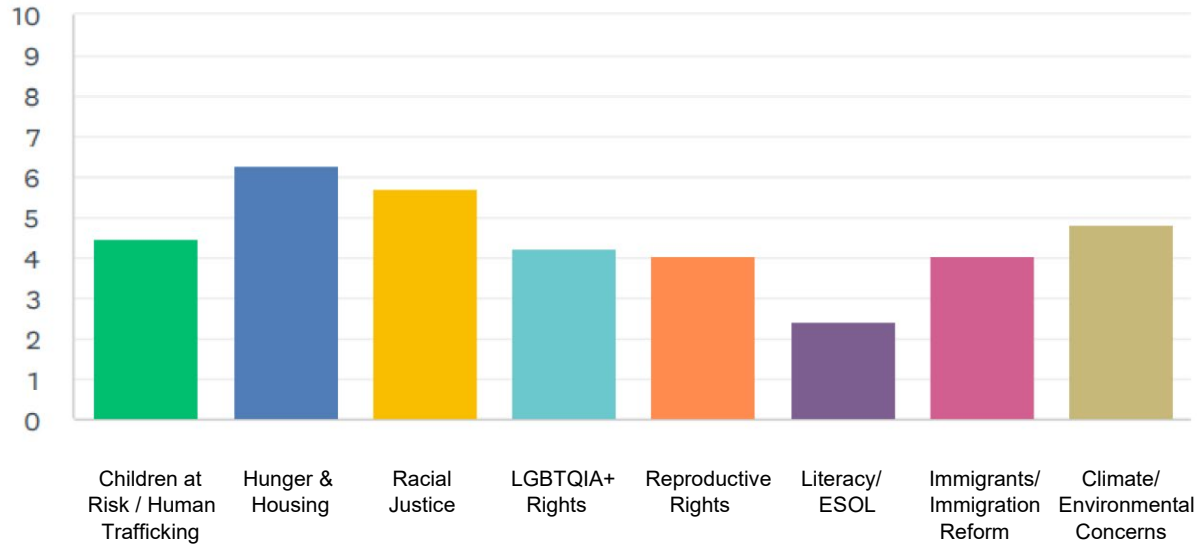
All the information in this report should be explored and validated in further conversation. Survey data is not the end of a conversation but the beginning.

The survey also found that NPC members' experience of "shalom" (wholeness, fulfillment, peace) is average to high compared to experiences at other churches, and members' experience of energy (purpose, passion with intention) is also high. The most important driver for NPC members' satisfaction was an exceptional worship experience. NPC membership places a high importance on governance within the church. Given the importance placed on governance, the leadership at NPC is focused on ensuring transparency and continuing to build trust within our system.

NPC is a progressive-adaptable church, a culture style referred to as a "Magi" by *Holy Cow! Consulting*. "Magi" are often concerned with the rational integrity of faith with justice as an application of faith and are comfortable with the idea of individual journeys and expressions of faith. A "Magi" congregation values open discourse and intellectual curiosity. NPC members have a long track record of living into their faith by centering justice for others at the core.

Lovingly known as the "hippie church" and "granola church," NPC has for decades embraced and welcomed all who find their way to our church family. NPC has been an affirming home for LBGTQIA+ individuals since electing a gay elder in the late 1980s. This stance was pivotal for NPC to take a leadership role in advocating for change throughout the Presbytery.

The chart below is a perfect example of NPC members living into their "Magi" culture. NPC strives to serve Christ by serving others and making a positive difference in our community and the wider world through advocacy and services. Members were invited to rank their interest in eight mission categories from highest to lowest. Hunger and Housing received the highest area of interest followed by Climate/Environmental Concerns. NPC has addressed these topics through such programs as an onsite no-questions-asked food pantry that is open to the public to take what they need to help offset food insecurity; and by installing solar panels that have offset our reliance on the electric grid.



NPC Listening Session Takeaways: 6 Goals for Our Church

"Most of us did not find NPC because we were Presbyterian; rather, we are Presbyterian because we found NPC."

This is just one of the insights from the eight Listening Sessions held with the congregation after *Holy Cow! Consulting* presented its survey results in 2022. The approximately 60 individuals attending these sessions helped pinpoint NPC's identity through the following observations:

Our values, our strengths, our culture

- Nacoochee members come from a variety of church backgrounds – Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic, Episcopal. Most of us did not find NPC because we were Presbyterian; rather, we are Presbyterian because we found NPC.
- NPC has a stable culture: The people in the pews change, but the feeling and character of the place is the same over the past 40 years.
- We all have different opinions, but we get together and work things out.
- We have a broad base of capable lay leadership; many people in the congregation have served on the Session.
- True to our Magi culture, we are a community of anti-authoritarian, independent thinkers.
- The identity of NPC is centered in inclusiveness and advocacy.
- We have a social justice viewpoint and promote social responsibility.
- Diversity is our strength.
- Love and welcome is our vision.
- We are a big tent: Everyone is welcome. (Inclusiveness)
- We are accepting and non-judgmental; we provide freedom to be yourself.
- Children who grow up at NPC go out into the world and do good things, focusing on social justice and inclusion.
- One long-time member says: "I'm old enough to know the person I want to be, and I feel that NPC equips me every week to better be that person".

From the survey results and Listening Session comments, we confirmed 6 goals for NPC.

- To make our decision making process more transparent by providing more information to our members, utilizing our various methods of communication, and providing more time for feedback and discussion before taking votes or implementing changes.
- To hold more adult Christian Education and community-building activities, such as adult discussion groups and lunch and dinner groups, and have some that meet during daytime hours and others that meet in the evening so those who work can participate.
- To hold newcomers' meetings on a regular basis, possibly with a meal, where we invite new members, recent visitors, and prospective visitors to attend.
- To be even more welcoming to visitors and new members by always greeting them and introducing ourselves, engaging them, and doing simple things like remembering to wear our name tags so that we learn each other by name.
- To increase and better publicize our community service for the purpose of making the church better known, believing this will encourage others to join us in service and membership and make possible more outreach to needy families.
- To reinforce and expand our ministry to youth and children with new programs for young people, possibly by adding a part time staff person and creating a mentoring program in local schools.

Conclusion: Widening the Welcome

To accomplish the six goals identified from the listening sessions, we are committing to these four imperatives—four guiding principles that will drive our work in the coming years.

- Increase transparency and input in governance.
- Become our best selves through creating structures and frameworks for intentional relationships, and shoring up spiritual vitality and Christian education.
- Create additional opportunities to support our local community members to eliminate barriers that hinder a life fully lived in Christ.
- Continue to *Widen the Welcome* for all who seek to serve and do God's work.

And that's where we are now, forging ahead through the process of identifying and ultimately choosing a pastor who will help us continue as a strong force for God's goodness, a church with open doors and open hearts.

In closing … A new commitment

In 2019, we were making plans for a 2020 Homecoming Celebration to commemorate the 150th anniversary of NPC. But on March 8, 2020, when the Presbytery began to discuss ideas on how to deal with the emerging pandemic, we put those plans on hold.

Like other churches, we entered the brave new world of meeting virtually for worship services and fellowship gatherings. Occasionally, we'd have in-person outdoor events when weather permitted so we could reconnect in a safe environment.

Meanwhile, the 150th Anniversary Celebration hasn't happened.

But as the pandemic recedes and all of us grow more comfortable with meeting in person, we're talking about rescheduling the event. Perhaps it will be a 155th Anniversary Celebration.

That said, what's most important now is to focus on our future.

We look forward to our next chapter as we strive together to make this world a better place for all. We stand ready to begin the work to make that happen.

Humbled by the grace of God and filled

with gratitude for what the future holds for NPC,

The Mission Study Task Force:

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Design: Jennifer Herrera

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