



High Bridge Presbyterian Church

Vision Task Force Report

February 27, 2022



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## SUMMARY

From June 2021 to February 2022 seven members of High Bridge Presbyterian Church served on the Vision Task Force. The task force, appointed by Session, met to consider the current identity and emerging calling of the congregation with support from the Interim Pastor and with the intent to fulfill the Mission Study requirement for the Presbytery of the Peaks.

The Vision Task Force considered congregation demographics and data, surrounding community demographics and data, church history, informally gathered qualitative data, and narrative inquiry with church members/friends and community partners.

Through narrative inquiry, three dominant strengths of High Bridge stood out: community connection, support for children and families, and hospitality. Three other traits/strengths stood out to a slightly lesser extent: generosity, appreciation for recent changes and growth, and appreciation and long for Christian formation. The VTF identified areas future growth for the congregation: nurturing intentional witness and developing communal mission.

The Vision Task Force proposed, and Session approved, the following Vision Statement:

*We believe that High Bridge Presbyterian Church is currently being called by God to continue sharing our Spirit-given gifts of hospitality, fellowship, and care for children and families and to grow in our intentional witness and sense of communal mission to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

The overall position of the church is healthy, and the congregation is well positioned to live into the vision statement and grow in discipleship with a new full-time installed pastor.

“Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness.”  
2 Corinthians 3:12

## THE PROCESS

Session appointed The Vision Task Force (VTF) in June 2021 for the purpose of leading the congregation through the discernment process required by Presbytery during the transition period. Members were: Jason Bunn (active Deacon), Scott Hannah, LeighAnn McCoy, Brad Meyers, Tracy Tackett (active Deacon), Allison Thompson, and Gayle Tolley, chair. The team had a diversity of ages, gender, and length of church membership. The team was guided by Rev. Dr. Amy Fetterman, Interim Pastor, who prepared this report with oversight by the High Bridge Vision Task force and approval by the Session.

The Vision Task Force began their work in July 2021 with the shared understanding that Session tasked them with discerning where/how God might be calling High Bridge to grow in faith, discipleship, and service.

The Interim Pastor offered the following framework for the process<sup>1</sup>:

- Collect previous data/visioning work (previous Mission Studies, MIFs, etc).
- Identify stakeholders defined as anyone who is impacted by ministry at/of High Bridge.
- Engage stakeholders through team-identified strategies. This would involve interpersonal engagement and review of primary source documents (e.g. school board meeting minutes).
- Discern connections. After engaging with stakeholders, the Task Force would discern what God might be saying through stakeholders and primary sources. This work includes developing a Vision Statement which identifies ministry priorities and growth areas for the Session, the upcoming PNC, and future leadership to consider.
- Report back to Session for approval.
- Share with congregation the Vision Statement and other learnings.
- Disband, letting Session, the Diaconate, and the future PNC take appropriate next steps to guide the congregation in realizing the vision.
- Offer feedback to Session and congregation throughout process (newsletter and HB Weekly articles, moments in worship, reports to Session, etc).

The Vision Task Force affirmed this process and the four major questions/areas they would seek to answer throughout their work:<sup>2</sup>

**1. Who are we?** This question considers the unique gifts and callings of the congregation. It's a question about strengths and growing edges. It's a question centering values and gifts.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Dr. Fetterman developed the process and guided the Task Force in its implementation. The process is informed by methodology and assumptions drawn from both Design Thinking and Asset Based Community Development.

<sup>2</sup> For more information on questions 1-3, see: Gil Rendle and Alice Mann. *Holy Conversations*. Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD. 2003, 3-6.

2. **Who is our neighbor?** This is a question about the dreams, sorrows, and gifts within the communities where High Bridge members live, work, study, and play.

3. **Who is God calling us to be in service with our neighbor?** What vision does God have for High Bridge in the next year? Five years? As the task force explored the first two questions, possible answers to these questions began to emerge. This question is rooted in an assumption made in faith: God has been preparing High Bridge to build upon both its strengths and its growing edges so that the church may share the Good News in word and deed.

4. Finally, **who is God calling to join us in this ministry?** The task force was not charged with identifying a specific person to serve as the next installed pastor. However, their work will help the future PNC identify possible attributes and strengths in ministry the next installed pastor might bear.

With these framing questions, the VTF sought God's vision for High Bridge in the coming years by engaging the congregation and community through small group conversations and one-on-one interviews.

The VTF identified stakeholders, defined for this process as any individual or groups impacted by the ministry of High Bridge, and separated the stakeholders into three different categories: Alpha, informal and formal affinity groups within the congregation; Beta, organizations/community groups with which High Bridge members serve or by which are served; and Gamma, institutional organizations the previous two groups impact or by which are impacted.

Alpha: Session, Diaconate, Christian Education teachers, Presbyterian Women, children at High Bridge, youth at High Bridge, adults with middle/high school kids, adults with younger children, empty nesters, Tuesday morning prayer group, homebound members, inactive members, college students. In addition to these affinity groups, the VTF offered connection points to these conversations for anyone in the congregation.

Beta: Rockbridge County schools, local food pantry, Weekday Religious Education, Ruritan Club, and Lisa House.

Gamma: Presbytery of the Peaks, Rockbridge County Area Relief Association, Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors, Chamber of Commerce, and other local non-profits as determined over the course of the vision work.

The VTF developed three primary questions to ask Alpha groups either in small group formats or one-on-one interviews. They developed four questions to ask Beta organizations. Gamma organizations were included in the community needs/gifts assessment work by the Interim

Pastor. Plans for larger church gatherings as part of the process were canceled due to continuing Covid concerns.

These small group and one-on-one conversations – identified later in this report as Narrative Inquiry – took place over three months. Given the challenge of gathering in-person during the Omicron surge, a few planned in-person small group meetings transitioned to Zoom meetings, one-on-one conversations, or email exchanges.

Following the collection of quantitative and qualitative data (Narrative Inquiry, demographics of the area and the congregation, emerging community needs, history of the congregation, and informally gathered qualitative data), the Vision Task Force prayerfully sought God’s vision for High Bridge Presbyterian Church. In their discernment, they offered the following statement:

*We believe that High Bridge Presbyterian Church is currently being called by God to continue sharing our Spirit-given gifts of hospitality, fellowship, and care for children and families and to grow in our intentional witness and sense of communal mission to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

On February 27, 2022, the Session of High Bridge Presbyterian Church received this report, approved the Vision Statement, and commended the report to Presbytery of the Peaks’ Committee on Ministry.

## HIGH BRIDGE DEMOGRAPHICS & DATA

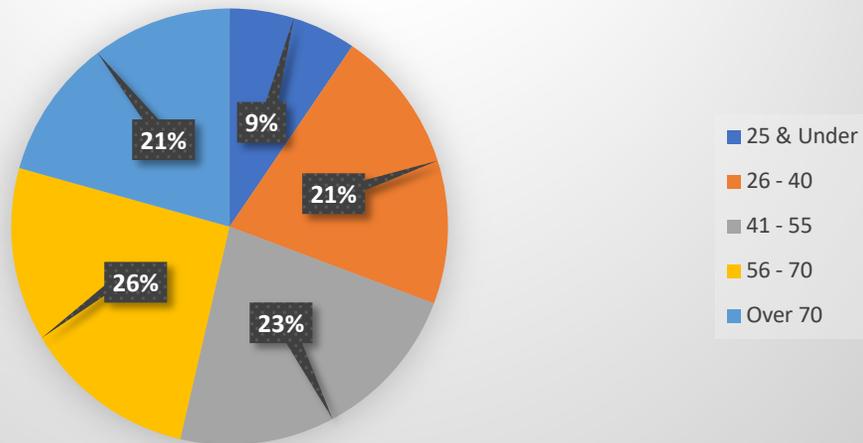
### DEMOGRAPHICS

In 2021, High Bridge had 179 members on its rolls.<sup>3</sup> The age distribution was as follows:

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, demographic data for High Bridge Presbyterian Church comes from church records including the Annual Statistical Reports.

## Membership Age Distribution for High Bridge Presbyterian Church



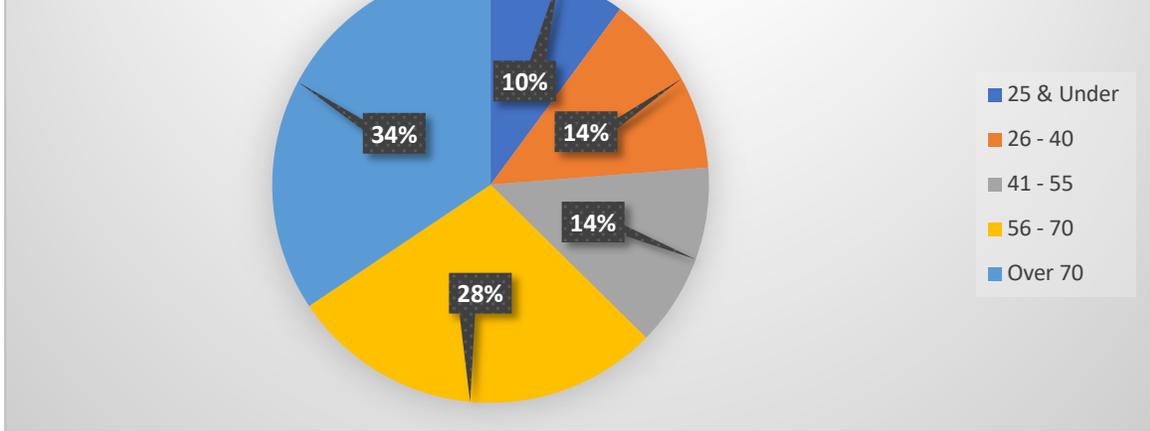
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When comparing the age distribution within all reporting churches in Presbytery of the Peaks, three age groupings stand out. High Bridge has a greater percentage of its population in both the “26-40” and “41-55” categories than the Presbytery as a whole. High Bridge also has a lower percentage of its population in the “over 70” category.

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<sup>4</sup> This figure includes people who live far away but maintain their membership at the church. This number does not include children who have not yet confirmed as active members nor other friends of the congregation active in the life of the church.

## Membership Age Distribution for Presbytery of the Peaks



The Vision Task Force anecdotally observed that within High Bridge’s 26-55 population were children of the congregation who went against the trend of migration of college-educated adults from rural communities to more urban settings. Research suggests that, in addition to economic factors, college-educated adults come back to rural communities based on “the strengths of adolescent experiences and neighborhood context influencing the pull to return home.”<sup>6</sup> While this research focuses specifically on school communities, the potential implication for church communities is worth noting.

Female congregations make up slightly more than half (55%) of High Bridge’s membership. Three active members identify as multi-racial. Three active members have hearing impairments and three have mobility impairment. There is no quantitative data on LGBTQ+ identification within the church. However, at least two families identified themselves as having a member of their family within that demographic through the narrative inquiry process.

### CHURCH ENGAGEMENT IN THE TRANSITION TIME

In 2021 the average weekly in-person attendance was 45 individuals. The average weekly worship attendance in 2020 was 58 and in 2019, 79. The previous five years ranged within the 70s. High Bridge’s in-person weekly attendance rates are consistent with national trends which

<sup>5</sup> “Church Trends: The Peaks,” Presbyterian Church Research Services, <https://church-trends.pcusa.org/presbytery/150530/membership/>

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Sowl, Rachel A. Smith, and Michael G. Brown, “Rural College Graduates: Who Comes Home?,” *Rural Sociology* 0(0), 2021, 1–27, p1. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/ruso.12416>.

reach across church size, denomination, and community setting. Research data suggests the average congregation is experiencing a decrease anywhere from 30% to 50% of in-person worship attendance when compared to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>7</sup>

Some researchers have also observed a significant drop for many churches from the end of 2020 attendance numbers to the end of 2021 numbers (34% average decrease within those 12 months).<sup>8</sup> While on the surface High Bridge's numbers reflect that trend, the 2020 average in-person worship attendance includes an average of 81 for two months pre-pandemic and an average of 32 for six months when the sanctuary reopened for in-person worship (following protocols of mask wearing and social distancing). If comparing pandemic-era worship attendance, High Bridge saw an increase in attendance by 40% in 2021.

The in-person attendance numbers do not reflect the whole of those who join with High Bridge for worship. In addition to in-person worship, HBPC introduced live-streaming and recorded services for members and friends. Between November 2021 and February 2022, the recorded service options had an average of 3 completed views a week.<sup>9</sup> The live-viewing link had an average of 5 unique clicks a Sunday.<sup>10</sup> These views/clicks might represent one individual, a couple, or a whole household.

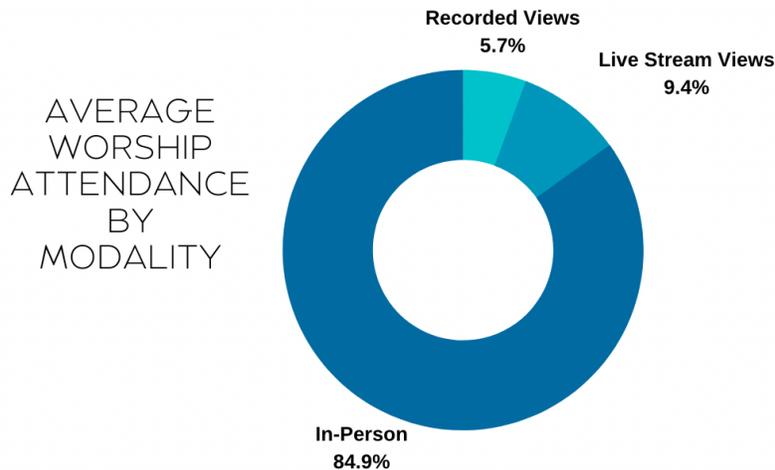
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<sup>7</sup>"Churches Changed During the Pandemic and Many Aren't Going Back," Janet Admay. Wall Street Journal. Nov 12, 2021. [https://www.wsj.com/articles/church-pandemic-covid-online-11636728162?reflink=desktopwebshare\\_permalink](https://www.wsj.com/articles/church-pandemic-covid-online-11636728162?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink).

<sup>8</sup> Unstuck Church Report Q4 2021. <https://theunstuckgroup.com/q4-2021-benchmarks-trends-for-church-health/>

<sup>9</sup> Each View' or 'Login' represents a device (TV, computer, tablet, cellphone, etc.) that has completely viewed the recording. What's not known are the number of people watching the presentation. These complete views represent the best estimates YouTube can provide given that folks will stop early, pause, replay sections, or just accidentally start playing the recording. The 'Whole Service' and the 'Sermon Only' numbers are separate views of separate recordings. It's assumed that someone who logged into and watched the 'Whole Service' did not log into the 'Sermon Only' also. Finally, these numbers do not include the folks who watched the 'Children's Sermon' which has an average of 7 views.

<sup>10</sup> This figure represents the number of unique email recipients who clicked on the livestreaming link. It does not include the number of times a link sent to a specific email may have been clicked. It also does not indicate the number of people watching or how much of the service was watched.



Based on the available data, it may be reasonable to surmise that at least 15% of High Bridge’s current worshipping community engages through on-line modalities.

Christian Education participants for 2021 were 85. This figure includes people who are both Sunday School teachers and participants (and thus doubling counted) as well as folks who have attended only one CE event throughout the year. Sunday School attendance may be closer to 30 individuals. Sunday school does not, however, include the totality of Christian Education opportunities. Other opportunities include Presbyterian Women Circle Bible studies, occasional small church events, VBS, and occasional at-home opportunities provided by the Interim Pastor.

High Bridge officially communicates with its members/friends through a monthly newsletter which is compiled and distributed by a long-time member of the church, a website which is updated semi-frequently by a member of the church, a phone tree for emergency/urgent information sharing, and a weekly emailed newsletter maintained by the Interim Pastor. The weekly emailed newsletters currently go to 136 email addresses (for High Bridge members and friends). From November through February, they had just over an average of 53% of recipients open them, a higher than average rate for faith organizations.<sup>11</sup>

#### FINANCES AND FACILITIES

High Bridge has strong history of a balance budget, even when expected giving may vary. The Finance Team has previously noted that a handful of giving units offer a larger percentage of total giving and the Finance Team has expressed interest in endowment conversations.

<sup>11</sup> Mailchimp, the service High Bridge uses, has an almost 28% open email rate for religious organizations (<https://mailchimp.com/resources/email-marketing-benchmarks/>) and Constant Contact reports a 41% open email rate for faith communities in Jan 2022 (<https://knowledgebase.constantcontact.com/articles/KnowledgeBase/5409-average-industry-rates>)

The facilities currently include sanctuary (approximately 200 person capacity) with a vestibule and two small rooms off the chancel, one serving as the church office, the other as the choir room; two story Christian education building: the top floor consisting of six small classrooms including a nursery, a bathroom, a mid-sized gathering space; a recently renovated bottom floor consisting of a large gathering space, two bathrooms, and a catering kitchen; a manse, which the church is currently renting through the assistance of professional property managers during the interim period.

The facilities are well-maintained facilities. Sanctuary was recently painted and has temporary live-streaming set-up. The church office was not utilized by the previous installed pastor who often met in the manse's study. With broadband access, it could serve as a good working space. It is currently, however, not possible to offer reasonable expectation of confidentiality for parishioner/pastor meetings. It, along with the choir room and chancel, is also not wheelchair accessible,

#### ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

High Bridge Presbyterian Church incorporated in 2015 with all active Ruling Elders members serving as trustees and all individuals on the membership roll acting as members of the corporation.

Seven active Ruling Elders serve on Session. The current Clerk of Session, following the ten-year tenure of the previous Clerk, is an inactive Ruling Elder with voice but no vote. The Session has nine committees: Cemetery, Christian Education, Congregational Care, Finance, Manual of Operations, Historian, Personnel, Scholarship, and Worship.

Nine Deacons serve on the Diaconate and oversee three committees: Fellowship and Visitation, Property/Buildings and Grounds, and Stewardship and Commitment. The Diaconate prepares the annual budget for Session approval. These officers are also supported by Receiving Treasurer and a Distributing Treasurer.

In addition to the full-time pastor, High Bridge has three part-time staff: a sexton, a quarter-time Director of Children's Ministry, and a pianist (currently contracted for each worship service). The Director of Children's Ministry position was added in September 2018. In April 2021, following the resignation of the volunteer pianist, High Bridge transitioned to a contracted pianist. All part-time staff positions are currently filled by church members.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, High Bridge formed a Covid-19 Response Task Force. The Task Force has offered guidance to the Session since 2020.

The church has a strong Presbyterian Women's presence with two circles that meet monthly. The Presbyterian Women spearhead much of the church's mission work and congregational care.

High Bridge is “pastoral-sized church” by both size and function.

Pastoral-size church (51 to 150 in worship): A coalition of two or three family and friendship networks unified around the person and role of the pastor. Clergy time is largely taken up maintaining a direct pastoral relationship with each member, coordinating the work of a small leadership circle, personally conducting worship, and leading small-group programs such as Bible study. The governing board usually operates like a committee, arranging much of the day-to-day life of the congregation. Members recognize each other’s faces, know most people’s names, and will notice if someone new is present at worship.

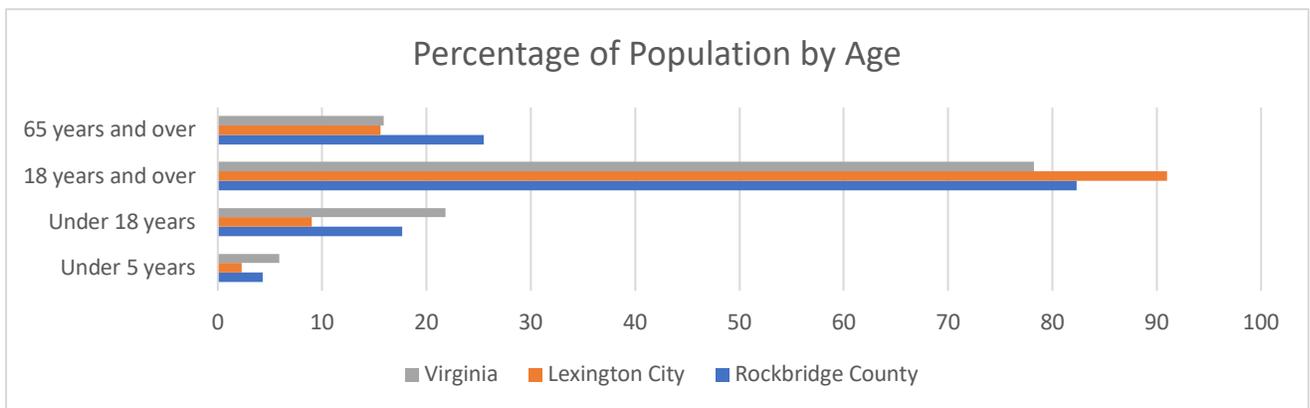
- Alice Mann. *Raising the Roof*. Rowman & Littlefield: Lanham, MD. 2001. p7.

### Surrounding Community Demographics & Data

Out of the 61 households identified as active by the transition team which onboarded the Interim Pastor, 55 are in Rockbridge County, 9 in Lexington City, 2 in Botetourt County, and 5 in various further afield areas. As such, Rockbridge serves as the primary area for demographic analysis, though Lexington City data is also considered.<sup>12</sup>

Rockbridge County has an estimated population of 22,650. Lexington City has an estimated population of 7,320 (including approximately 3,200 people enrolled in collegiate institutions).<sup>13</sup>

#### AGE



<sup>12</sup> As Lexington is a college town, home to Washington and Lee University and the Virginia Military Institute, available residential data is skewed due to the inclusion of college students. While organizations with ties to the colleges may benefit from this data, it’s important for other groups to understand the demographics on year-round, long-term area residents.

<sup>13</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, the datasets referenced are from the US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/VA>. Accessed 1.12.2022.

When comparing the age spread for Rockbridge County and Lexington City to the total Virginia State population, one difference stands out in particular: 25.5% of Rockbridge County’s residents are 65 years and older compared to 15.9% of all Virginia residents.

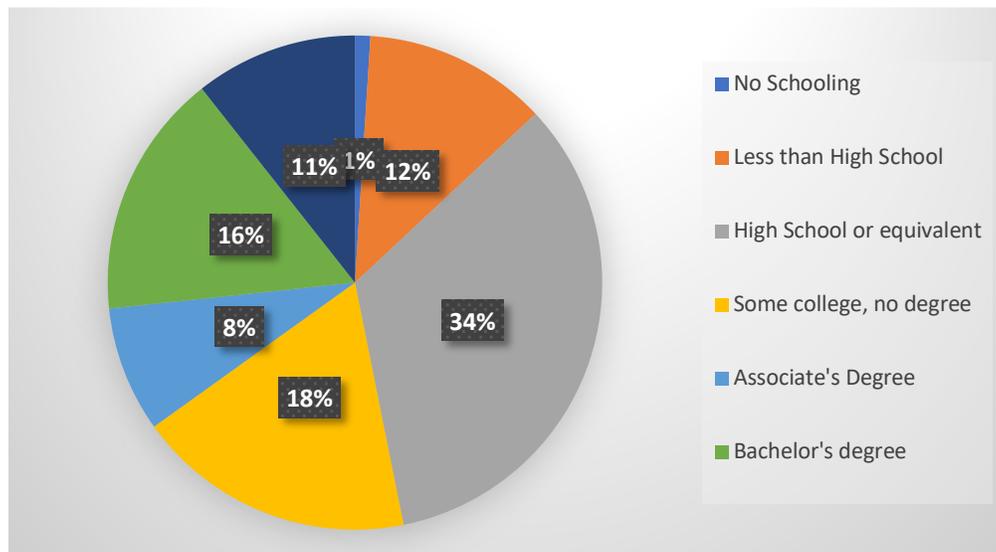
**RACIAL/ETHNIC DIVERSITY**

Rockbridge County’s population is 92.2% White (Non-Hispanic), 3.27% Black or African American (Non-Hispanic), 1.91% White (Hispanic), 1.42% Multi-racial, and 1.2% Other.

Lexington City’s population is 79.1% White (Non-Hispanic), 8.67% Black or African American (Non-Hispanic), 6.12% White (Hispanic), 3.45% Asian (Non-Hispanic), 2.47% Multi-racial, and .09% Other. For reference, Lexington’s 2019 higher education graduating student population was 83.1% White (Non-Hispanic), followed by 4.72% Hispanic, 3.92% Black or African American, and 3.61% Asian, and 4.65% Multi-Racial and Other.<sup>14</sup>

**EDUCATION**

Rockbridge County has four elementary schools (three of which offer preschool opportunities), one middle school, and one high school. Rockbridge County High School has a graduation rate of 91%, 2 percent lower than the state average.<sup>15</sup>



**Rockbridge County Education Levels for Residents Age 25 and Up<sup>16</sup>**

<sup>14</sup> “Lexington City: Education,” DataUSA, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/lexington-city-va#education>.

<sup>15</sup> “Rockbridge County High,” US News and World Report, <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-high-schools/virginia/districts/rockbridge-county-public-schools/rockbridge-county-high-20613>

<sup>16</sup> Datasets obtained from 2020 American Community Survey census data, Common Core Data.

## AFFILIATIONS

While Rockbridge County is a “red” county, the county has recent history of 33-40% voters supporting the Democratic candidate in presidential elections. It is also less partisan than many of its neighboring counties. Lexington City has a history of being a “blue” city, with roughly 60/40 split.<sup>17</sup>

In 2010 (the most recent data available), 29% of all Rockbridge County residents were members of a religious community (including non-Christian traditions) and slightly more than a quarter of these residents affiliated with the PC(USA).<sup>18</sup> Only Baptist traditions had a larger percentage of affiliated residents in Rockbridge.

75.8% of all Lexington City residents (including college/university students) identified as members of a religious community with about 12% of these residents affiliated with the PC(USA).<sup>19</sup> In Lexington, the five religious traditions with the greatest number of adherents are: Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, United Methodist, PC(USA), and Non-denominational.

44% of all Virginia residents are members of a religious community with approximately 3% of these residents affiliated with the PC(USA).<sup>20</sup>

## BROADBAND ACCESS

Rockbridge County residents have a lower rate (75.7%) of access to broadband compared to the statewide rate (83.9%). There is also a noticeable difference between rate of Rockbridge County’s population underserved by broadband access (14.8%) and the state rate (4.4%).<sup>21</sup>

In December 2021, Rockbridge County received news that the state would not be granting hoped for funding to help improve these disparities. The County and service partners have plans for revamping their grant proposal and hope to receive funding for 2023.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> “Rockbridge County: Presidential Popular Vote By County,” DataUSA, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/rockbridge-county-va>.

<sup>18</sup> Congregational adherents include all full members, their children, and others who regularly attend services. “County Membership Report: Rockbridge County, Virginia,” Association of Religious Data Archives, <https://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/rcms2010a.asp?U=51163&T=county&S=Name&Y=2010>.

<sup>19</sup> “County Membership Report: Lexington City, Virginia,” Association of Religious Data Archives, <https://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/rcms2010a.asp?U=51678&T=county&S=name&Y=2010>.

<sup>20</sup> State Membership Report: Virginia,” Association of Religious Data Archives, <https://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/rcms2010a.asp?U=51&T=state&S=name&Y=2010>.

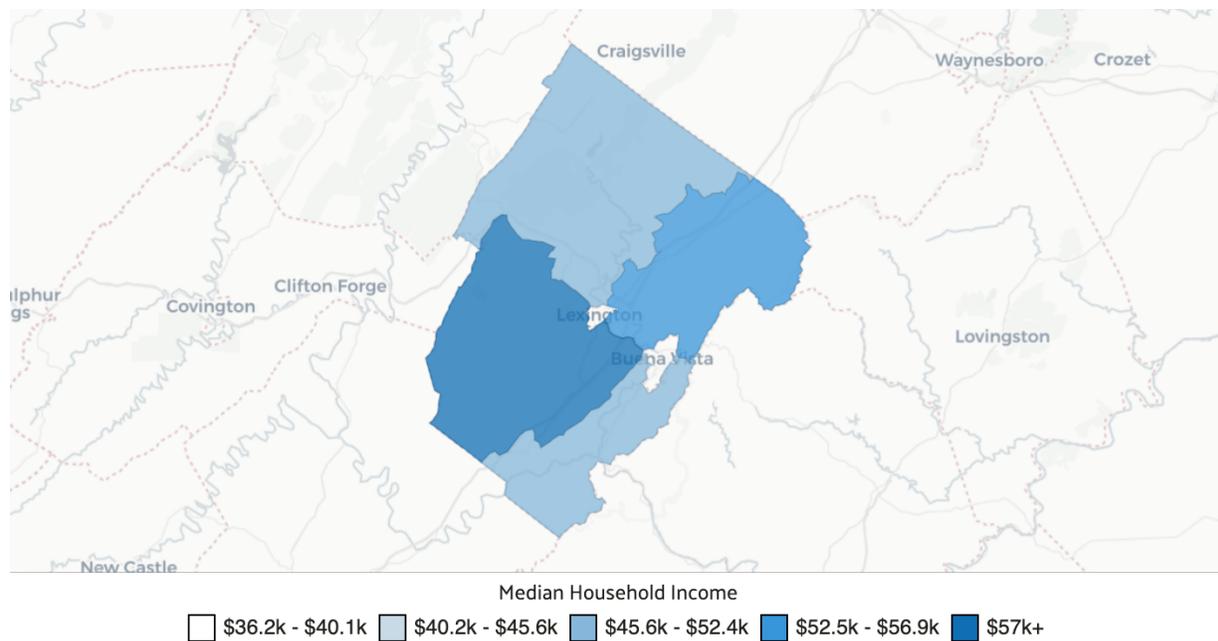
<sup>21</sup> “Rockbridge Broadband Access,” Virginia Department of Health, <https://www.vdh.virginia.gov/equity-at-a-glance/locality/broadband/>.

<sup>22</sup> “Broadband Construction for Rockbridge County Moving Forward,” BARC Electric, <https://barcelectric.com/news/broadband-expansion-for-rockbridge-county-moving-forward/>

## EMPLOYMENT

Based on number of employees, the top three most common employment categories for Rockbridge County residents are Sales and Related Occupations, Management Occupations, and Office & Administrative Support Occupations. Compared to other Virginia counties, Rockbridge County has an unusually high number of residents working as Farming, Fishing, & Forestry Occupations (2.18 times higher than expected), Community & Social Service Occupations (1.45 times), and Installation, Maintenance, & Repair Occupations (1.45 times).<sup>23</sup>

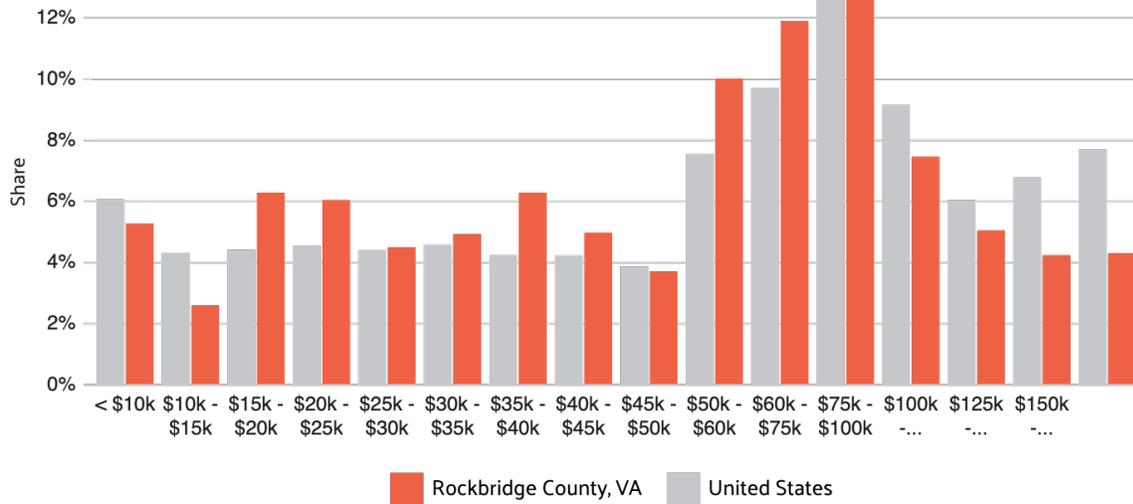
## SOCIOECONOMIC



The median household income for the whole of Rockbridge County is \$54,600. However, as the infographic above illustrates, much of the Natural Bridge area is in the \$40.2k-\$45.6k median range.

<sup>23</sup> "Rockbridge County: Median Household Income," DataUSA. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/rockbridge-county-va>.

<sup>24</sup> "Rockbridge County: Median Household Income," DataUSA. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/rockbridge-county-va>.



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While Rockbridge County has a lower percentage of its population in deep poverty range (<\$15k depending on household size) compared to the United States as a whole, it has a greater percentage of its population ranging between \$15k-45k.

In 2020 Rockbridge/Buena Vista/Lexington had a slightly higher poverty rate for all age groups when compared to the whole Piedmont area (a Dept of Social Services regional designation) and several percentage points higher than the statewide population.

Poverty Rate (%)	Rockbridge/ Buena Vista/ Lexington		Piedmont		Statewide	
	All ages	Children	All ages	Children	All ages	Children
2007	12.7%	14.0%	13.0%	17.6%	9.9%	12.9%
2008	13.5%	15.1%	13.2%	17.3%	10.2%	13.6%
2009	13.4%	16.6%	14.2%	19.2%	10.6%	14.0%
2010	14.1%	18.1%	15.0%	20.6%	11.1%	14.6%
2011	14.7%	18.9%	15.1%	21.0%	11.6%	15.6%
2012	15.3%	18.9%	15.2%	21.1%	11.8%	15.5%
2013	15.7%	19.2%	15.3%	21.8%	11.7%	15.7%
2014	15.4%	19.7%	15.4%	21.6%	11.8%	15.9%
2015	15.0%	19.3%	14.8%	20.9%	11.2%	15.0%
2016	14.4%	19.0%	14.1%	19.6%	11.0%	14.3%
2017	14.5%	17.4%	13.5%	18.8%	10.7%	14.0%
2018	14.2%	17.0%	14.4%	19.9%	10.7%	13.8%
2019	14.1%	18.0%	12.7%	18.1%	9.9%	13.3%
<b>2020</b>	<b>12.2%</b>	<b>16.0%</b>	<b>11.6%</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>9.2%</b>	<b>12.2%</b>

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<sup>25</sup> “Rockbridge County: Household Income,” DataUSA. <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/rockbridge-county-va>.

<sup>26</sup> Department of Social Services, *Local Department of Social Services Profile Report, SFY 2021*, (Richmond, VA: 2021).

While 12% of the total population lives in poverty, children make up more of that number with 16% of children in the area living in poverty. As the chart shows, the rate of total population and population of children in poverty has gone down several percentage points since its high in 2014. Most economists believe, however, that the decrease in poverty as seen in the chart above is due to Extended Child Tax Credit which, as of this report, has not been continued. Nationally, poverty rates among children jumped 41% in the first month of 2022.<sup>27</sup>

The use of social services has varied over the last eight years.

Benefit Clients Served by State Fiscal Year	Benefit Program				Child Care	
	SNAP	TANF	Medicaid	Any Program <sup>2</sup>	Families	Children
2013	6,338	291	6,054	8,595	35	59
2014	6,017	324	6,238	8,478	49	74
2015	5,689	251	6,461	8,558	46	75
2016	5,452	225	6,846	8,818	35	56
2017	5,621	266	7,119	8,823	21	28
2018	4,733	274	7,117	8,047	16	19
2019	4,624	359	8,250	8,814	30	36
2020	4,499	260	8,983	9,407	40	57
2021	4,942	263	9,316	9,854	39	52

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## HEALTH

Approximately 11.5% of Rockbridge County residents do not have healthcare insurance, a number slightly higher than the state average (10.1%).<sup>29</sup> Across the state, 12.4% of adults with mental illness are uninsured. Virginia ranks 37 out of 51 for access to mental health care according to Mental Health America, a national non-partisan nonprofit focused on addressing the needs of people with mental illness and promoting overall mental health for all.<sup>30</sup> Prior to the pandemic, Virginia ranked 40 out of 51 in Mental Health Workforce Availability, with a

<sup>27</sup> “Monthly Poverty Data,” Center on Poverty & Social Policy, <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/forecasting-monthly-poverty-data>.

<sup>28</sup> Department of Social Services, *Local Department of Social Services Profile Report, SFY 2021*, (Richmond, VA: 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Healthiest Communities: Rockbridge County, US News and World Report, <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/virginia/rockbridge-county>.

<sup>30</sup> “Access to Care Ranking 2022,” Mental Health America, <https://mhanational.org/issues/2022/ranking-states#four>.

ration of 530 residents to every one provider.<sup>31</sup> In 2022, 55.2% percent of Virginian youth with a major depressive episode did not receive any treatment.<sup>32</sup>

Carilion Rockbridge Community Hospital published their 2021 community assessment report in August of that year. The report named alcohol and drug use and mental health problems as two of the top three issues impacting the health of the community. Mental health services are seen as the most difficult health service to access.<sup>33</sup>

Rockbridge County’s population of adults with frequent mental distress is 2.4 percentage points higher than statewide. Its “death of despair” per 100k is 1.1 percentage points higher.

METRIC	COUNTY	U.S.	PEER GROUP	STATE
Adults With Frequent Mental Distress	15.3%	15.1%	14.0%	12.9%
Deaths of Despair /100k	35.9	43.3	44.2	34.8
Medicare Beneficiaries With Depression	17.8%	18.0%	16.6%	17.3%

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## GOVERNMENT AND NGO PRIORITIES

### *Community Health Need Priorities*

In response to the 2021 Community Health Assessment, Carilion Rockbridge Community Hospital identified the ten top health need priorities grouped in four main categories.

- Mental Health: Access to mental/behavioral health services; Stress; Mental health problems (general); Alcohol and drug use.
- Socioeconomic Factors: Poverty/low average household income.
- Health Behaviors: Culture (healthy behaviors not a priority); Overweight/obesity; Lack of health literacy/lack of knowledge of healthy behaviors; Lack of knowledge of community resources.

<sup>31</sup> “Mental Health Workforce Availability,” Mental Health America, <https://mhanational.org/issues/2022/mental-health-america-access-care-data#ten>.

<sup>32</sup> “Youth Data 2022,” Mental Health America, <https://mhanational.org/issues/2022/mental-health-america-youth-data>.

<sup>33</sup> CarilionClinic, *Rockbridge Area Community Health Assessment: Final Report August 31, 2021*, (Lexington, VA: 2021), 5.

<sup>34</sup> Healthiest Communities: Rockbridge County, US News and World Report, <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/virginia/rockbridge-county>.

- Covid-19: Covid-19 Impact.<sup>35</sup>

### *Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors*

The Rockbridge County Board of Supervisors approved several funding priorities included two which might impact those reached by High Bridge’s mission and outreach.

- “The Board will strive to support services that provide a critical “safety net” for citizens in need due to circumstances beyond their control, including child and social services programs. For their part, service agencies must pursue opportunities to enhance efficiencies or leverage current capabilities to optimize the delivery of these vital services.
- Funding for public education, public education, public safety, health and welfare, and solid waste management shall be key objectives for the fiscal year. These budget categories may be determined to need and realize increased funding compared to prior years.”<sup>36</sup>

Rockbridge Area Community Service Board (RACSB) – the organization the county supports with its mental health budget line-item <sup>37</sup> – has seen an increase in estimated expenses (6% for 2022).<sup>38</sup>

### *Rockbridge County Public Schools*

Rockbridge County Public Schools affirmed the following priorities in their last comprehensive plan which covered the period from 2018-2022:

- Student Success: Engage students in authentic learning that supports meaningful academic, artistic, and athletic performances, and inspires every student to achieve life, career, and post-secondary success.
- Instruction, Leadership, and Support: Provide high-quality and innovative instruction, leadership, and support for all students and families across every aspect of school and division operations.
- School Safety, Culture, and Climate: Create safe, supportive, and mutually nurturing learning and work environments.

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<sup>35</sup> CarilionClinic, *Rockbridge Area Community Health Assessment: Health Improvement Implementation Strategy FY 2022-2024*, (Lexington, VA: 2021), 6.

<sup>36</sup> County of Rockbridge, *Fiscal Year 2022 Budget*, Board of Supervisors, (Rockbridge County, VA: 2021).

<sup>37</sup> The line-item for mental health care covers identified core services including: “include case management; in-patient, outpatient, day support, residential, prevention, and early intervention services for mental health, intellectual/development disability, and substance abuse treatment needs.” County of Rockbridge, *Fiscal Year 2022 Budget*, Board of Supervisors, (Rockbridge County, VA: 2021), 97.

<sup>38</sup> “About: Financials”, Rockbridge Area Community Services, <https://www.racsb.org/about>.

- Communication and Engagement: Provide opportunities and resources for students, families, employees, and community members to be purposely connected and engaged with their school and/or the school division.<sup>39</sup>

Rockbridge County Public Schools has also sought to address new challenges and concerns presented by the on-going pandemic. They have sought to reduce broadband access disparity by offering internet access in the parking lots of all school campuses and providing a map of local locations with free Wi-Fi. In August 2021 they worked with RACSB to train school employees training school employees “on recognizing and responding to students who have and/or are experiencing trauma.”<sup>40</sup>

## History

Founded in 1770, High Bridge Presbyterian Church has been serving God and the people of southern Rockbridge County for over 250 years. 35 pastors have served the church over its history in a long-term capacity, with the current Interim Pastor being the first clergywoman to serve. High Bridge elected its first female deacons (Lorene Hannah and Virginia Shafer) in 1966 and first female elder (Virginia Shafer) in 1970.

In recent history, High Bridge welcomed Rev. Jason Grimes as their installed pastor in 2009 after three-year interim period where they were served by two different pastors, including Rev. Louis “Skid” Skidmore. Rev. Grimes’ tenure is marked with a narrative of growth. While the growth may not necessarily be in numbers,<sup>41</sup> the congregation readily speaks of the spiritual growth they underwent during his time. Ruling Elders speak about better understanding about their role. The previous Clerk of Session who worked with him for eight years shared how he helped bring the “Presbyterian order” to the church’s councils. In addition, some members speak of how young families began to come or come back to church during this time.

During this period High Bridge also incorporated, developed, and maintained a thorough Manual of Operations; brought ministries offered by individuals under the oversight of the church’s councils; adopted a mission statement; developed a logo; and hired a quarter-time Director of Children’s Ministries.

This period also saw meaningful small groups come and go. One such group, the young adult women’s group, met for fellowship and support for a few years. During the VTF process, some of those women shared challenges when individual(s) in the church tried to strongly encourage

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<sup>39</sup> Rockbridge County Public Schools, *Building Bridges for Tomorrow: Comprehensive Plan 2018-2022*, (Lexington, VA: 2018), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Rockbridge County Public Schools, *Frequently Asked Questions 2021-2022*, (Lexington, VA: 2021), 12.

<sup>41</sup> In Rev. Grimes third year at High Bridge (the first year with available data) the church’s membership was 177 worship attendance of 76. In 2019 (the last year of his tenure before Covid) High Bridge had 182 members with a worship attendance of 79. <https://church-trends.pcusa.org/church/23011/overview/>

an adaption of intentional programming. They affirmed an appreciation of the organic nature of the group, how it met emerging needs at a specific time in their lives.

High Bridge nurtured small groups called “small church” or “home church,” which hold fond memories in many congregants’ hearts. One of the well-represented families in the congregation has reinitiated this idea in the last year, meeting sporadically with announcements for the gatherings made in worship.

Rev. Grimes and the church leadership planted seeds around the concepts of adaptive change and paradigm shifts. The Manual of Operations includes a directive that the responsibilities and descriptions of the Session and Diaconate committees will be reviewed at least every five years.

In 2018, Session and Rev. Grimes came to an agreement that the current ministry model of the church would not be sustainable. Prior to his sabbatical, Rev. Grimes shared the following reflection questions via the June monthly newsletter: “What are your expectations for ministry at High Bridge? Who do you expect to carry out your expectations? What role do you play in carrying out your expectations? What role does the pastor play in carrying out your expectations and dreams for ministry?”

During this same time, Rev. Grimes wrote the following statement to be paired with the newly adapted logo (which is included in the Manual of Operations and was referenced in the Interim Pastor MIF):

“We yearn to be “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season” (Psalm 1:3). We desire to nurture our faith in Jesus through worship, fellowship, and growth. High Bridge has worshipped as a community of faith since 1770 which means we have deep roots in Southern Rockbridge County. We are rooted in Scripture and witness new life in people. The rings of history are visible, but leaves of youth are present and in our future. High Bridge is located minutes from Lexington, but we are surrounded by the beauty of God’s Creation. The Southern Shenandoah Valley is our home. We look forward to John’s vision of the New Jerusalem when he writes, “On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations” (Rev.22:2).”

During the last few years, High Bridge has experienced the loss of several patriarchs of the church, including Rev. Louis Skidmore who attended worship and taught a Sunday School class.

When the Covid-19 pandemic began, High Bridge also suffered losses like other churches. Many programs and “way things have been done” went by the wayside. The 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration has been changed into a planned 255<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration. Sunday School became Zoom Sunday School which did not maintain attendance or energy over the 2020-2021 year.

The church also experienced several additions, some temporary and some which may continue past the pandemic. During summer 2020, Rev. Grimes led outdoor evening vespers on Wednesdays. Dilshani Grimes, Rev. Grimes' spouse, became officially recognized and compensated for her administrative work. She had previously started and run the church website, among other administrative services. With the advent of Covid-19, she also created and distributed a weekly email newsletter. She also live-streamed worship on Sundays. The prayer group which had met weekly at the manse now meets via Zoom. The Children's Christmas Pageant which had been held inside the sanctuary has been transformed into a Live Community Drive-thru Christmas Pageant which collects goods and funds for the local food pantry.

## Small Moments of Congregational Engagement

Throughout the period in which they met, the members of the VTF engaged the congregation and community in relational moments which further informed their discernment. Qualitative research was not limited to the official small group gatherings and one-on-ones.

In addition, the Interim Pastor utilized worship services and Christian Education moments to engage the congregation in the four framing questions of the VTF's process.

For example, a June worship service celebrated work of Holy Spirit during the past year and invited attendees to reflect on the following questions:

- How is God continuing to tell the story of love, grace, compassion, and service through our church?
- What might God be dreaming for High Bridge in the years to come?

The attendees were invited to write down their responses with the understanding that they would be prayed over by the Interim Pastor and shared as a part of the visioning process. When the VTF reviewed these responses alongside the Narrative Inquiry data, they noted several of the themes seen in the Narrative Inquire could also be seen in here.

## Narrative Inquiry

### CURIOUS QUESTIONS

The Vision Task Force sought to engage stakeholders with questions which invited not just answers but engagement. The VTF centered a "not-knowing" stance and open possibilities in their questions.

The Vision Task Force developed three questions to ask the identified Alpha stakeholder groups:

1. What gifts and/or strengths does High Bridge possess which God might work though?
2. How might God be calling us to transform the community?
3. What was undervalued before Covid that might hold greater value now?

Those who met in small groups, as opposed to one-on-ones, were also asked to share their thoughts and reflect on any connections they heard in those thoughts.

For Beta stakeholder groups, the VTF developed four questions:

1. What positive qualities do people say your organization (and/or members) has/have?
2. Who are the people/community you offer those gifts to? In what ways do you offer these gifts?
3. What gifts does your organization (and/or members) have/see that you hope might be utilized even more in the future?
4. What, if anything, do you know about High Bridge Presbyterian Church?

#### GIFTS AND STRENGTHS

Through prayerful consideration of the responses received through the Narrative Inquiry process, the VTF identified three major gifts or strengths in High Bridge.

- Fellowship, or Congregational Connection: the value in, the solid foundation of, the missing of; history of compassion and care which has drawn some people back to the church after time away; appreciate for new ways of maintaining connection including live and recorded worship services; weekly newsletter and monthly newsletter; website and social media; congregational care through cards, phone calls, visits, cupcakes!
- Care for Children and Families: something older generations enjoy/value and something younger families desire/value; value incorporation of younger people in full life of church including leadership roles.
- Hospitality: strong sense of welcoming new people when they come; engaging friends and new members in life of church; worked to draw in the greater community in activities in the church (pre-Covid).

The VTF also noted three other gifts and strengths which appeared in the qualitative data to a lesser extent:

- Generosity: when asked, congregation gives “shirt off their backs and so much time;” will absolutely roll up their sleeves and do hard work to help another congregant and (often) community member.

- Appreciation for Recent Growth/Changes: noting a movement toward a more open-system where new ideas and new people welcomed. Flexibility noted, inclusion of children in the church “heard and not just seen.”
- Appreciation and Longing for Christian Formation: appreciation for the opportunity to learn more about scripture both in a Sunday School setting and in “small church” setting; longing for not just more of what was but more of the rooting that could be found in what was.

## GROWING EDGES

Stakeholders also offered possible ways High Bridge could continue to grow their strengths.

- Fellowship: Empowering congregation to reach out to those not here – cards available to send, connections made between young adults
- Care for Children and Families: Continue offering opportunities for generations to create relationships; think about what might be changed to meet the current needs of children/families.
- Hospitality: Think about who’s not here. Who in the current membership isn’t here? Does High Bridge’s lack of open dialogue around certain topics like the LGBTQ+ community make the church less hospitable for church members who identify as a part of that community? Does humility keep the church silent about the mission individual members engage in, making it harder for others to join in? What other ways of doing worship or Christian education or fellowship might the church consider to be even more welcoming?

The VTF noted a one major trend in responses to the third question (“How might God work through High Bridge?”) asked of Alpha group members: uncertainty.

Respondents frequently expressed a belief that God could and would work through High Bridge. They often articulated a desire for a future where the church was more active in witness and service. Few had ideas of what that service might be or even where to start.

When the Vision Task Force discussed this trend, they believed it honestly reflected the reality of outreach at High Bridge. Community organizations High Bridge has long supported (through specific members) and organizations with many individual congregants as members are aware of the church and its gifts/strengths. Yet organizations not actively served by or consisting of High Bridge members did not have much familiarity with the church.

Mission and outreach happen at High Bridge but these opportunities are not always intentionally communicated. Members often remain silent about their service, reflecting a trend toward silence in congregational culture. This silence stems from humility in addition to occasional avoidance. Congregants also often assume, as in many churches, that if they know about something others must too.

The VTF also discussed efforts by the previous installed Pastor to nurture a stronger sense of communal mission. They identified mission trips to West Virginia as the result of those efforts. The mission trips were deeply meaningful to the handful of members that participated but they did not foster a sense of communal mission. They also did not continue beyond a couple of years.

The VTF recognized that there are many opportunities to grow in service, to share the gifts God has given the church with the community. They also recognized an opportunity to increase community awareness of both the church and the faith it represents.

In prayerful discernment, the Vision Task Force came to the belief that God might desire the church to nurture intentional witness and develop communal mission.

## A VISION FOR HIGH BRIDGE

In 2017, the Session of High Bridge Presbyterian Church approved a brief mission statement.

Raised to new life in Christ Jesus our Lord, we desire to:

Worship God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit;

Love the Lord Our God with our whole heart, mind, and soul;

Love our neighbors in Southern Rockbridge County, region, and world;

Promote an environment of spiritual growth and discipleship by heading the words of the Apostle Paul when he writes: "...God wants us to grow up, to know the whole truth and tell it in love—like Christ in everything. We take our lead from Christ, who is the source of everything we do. He keeps us in step with each other. His very breath and blood flow through us, nourishing us so that we will grow up healthy in God, robust in love." (Ephesians 4:15-16, The Message)

The Vision Statement is offered as an extension of the Mission Statement, a way to live out that mission at this moment in the church's life.

*We believe that High Bridge Presbyterian Church is currently being called by God to continue sharing our Spirit-given gifts of hospitality, fellowship, and care for children and families and to grow in our intentional witness and sense of communal mission to the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*