

AAA Forum
March 23, 2019
Third Street Presbyterian Church, Gastonia, NC

The fifth Forum for the African American Churches of the Presbytery of Western North Carolina was held on Saturday, March 23, 2019, at Third Street Presbyterian Church in Gastonia, NC. Five of the eight congregations were represented, with 40 members present. The congregations were Dulatown, Good Hope, Love's Chapel, Ryburn, and Third Street. The people of Third Street graciously hosted the gathering, providing snacks, delicious pound cake and brownies, and drinks, as well as preparing and cleaning up the space. Lunch was provided by the Foundation and the Presbytery.

The meeting was opened with a warm welcome, Scripture (Jeremiah 6:16), and prayer by the Rev. Patricia Reid, Pastor of Third Street Presbyterian Church. The Rev. Dr. Jerry L. Cannon, Senior Pastor of C.N. Jenkins Memorial Presbyterian Church in Charlotte, and representing the Presbyterian Foundation, offered a devotion.

The Rev. Dr. Hal Bennett II, Pastor of Dulatown Presbyterian Church, presented a review and purpose of the Forum. Olanda Carr, Ministry Relations Officer of the East Region for the Presbyterian Foundation, gave the statistical outlook for the Church, and talked about Life Cycles of congregations. The Rev. Dr. Cam Murchison, Stated Clerk for the Presbytery of Western North Carolina, brought greetings from the Presbytery.

Olanda spoke kind words about the Rev. Eddie Deas, former Pastor at Third Street, and his passion for this group of churches. Eddie was instrumental in the formation of the Forums, and in leading the Team in their continued efforts. He is missed.

The participants worked around tables discussing and formulating answers to five questions, with the overall theme being, "Where are we?" The questions were: (1) Within your church, is there more talk about the past than about the future? (2) Is your congregation a fault-finding church? (3) Does the leadership of your church have a clear vision and set goals? (4) Is your church budget severely inwardly focused? (5) Is change in your congregation met with fierce resistance? Each group selected a recorder to report their findings.

The groups continued working at lunch, then moved into the reporting and visioning for the future phase. Table discussion results were presented by Glenda Williams from Good Hope, Eric Boston from Dulatown, Charlie Stroman from Third Street, Sherry Lovell from Love's Chapel, and Pat Reid from Third Street. (These listings are the home churches of the presenters, but answers were from more than one congregation, as members were scattered among the tables.)

The afternoon session was an open forum discussion on visioning for the future. Hal, Olanda, and Dot Descieux spoke about growing the church, closing it, or getting healthier. An offer was made for any of the churches to seek further assistance from the three for their individual situations, in looking more closely at such things as finances, membership trends, overall health and vitality within a given congregation. Dot told about how her own congregation in Asheville found the need to close a few years ago, and how that has affected those left from that group. There were two churches in Buncombe County several years ago that were only a few miles apart, and wisely joined together as a single

congregation in one of the buildings, to become a more robust body in the community. Mention was made of assistance for specific ministries from Synod Grants, Water-to-Wine Grants on the Presbytery level, and church development funds from the HOPE Campaign. Olanda and the Foundation have been involved with this group for a number of years, and continue to stand ready to help congregations examine themselves and their present situations, compare them to past levels, and discern how to better be the church in the future.

The Planning Team will meet next at Dulatown on April 26 to review the overall program and decide when the Fall Forum will be held.

Dot Descieux
African American Advisory Team