

Earle Street Baptist Church

Our Journey in Faith

Strategic Plan 2022



“a home to all who would enter”

Mission:

The mission of Earle Street Baptist Church is to worship God (*worship*); to share the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed (*missions*); to be a home to all who would enter (*fellowship*); to minister to the needs of one another (*ministry*); and to assist in spiritual growth (*spiritual growth*).

These words seek to give expression to our understanding of our church's purpose for being... and to give direction to the choices we make in the stewardship of our time and talents, energies and financial resources. Earle Street is a thriving congregation, alive and active, but at the heart of our activity is a desire to fulfill the five-fold purpose of the church embodied in our mission statement.

Greater Way Covenant:

The people of Earle Street Baptist Church, both individually and collectively, covenant with God and one another to live the “greater way” as defined by Jesus in the two great commandments (love God and love neighbors) and the great commission (make disciples). As disciples of Jesus Christ, we prayerfully aspire daily to live this “greater way.”

Vision:

To continue being a healthy, vibrant, growing community of faith.

What drives our beliefs, decisions, and actions?

We are united by our shared faith in Jesus Christ, and we cooperate as a community of individual believers led by the Holy Spirit.

Our Journey in Faith—the process

On May 23, 2021, the congregation approved the concept of *Our Journey in Faith*, an open-ended process of challenging ourselves to hear what the Holy Spirit has to say to us about where we have come from, where we are now, and where we should be in the future. Since that time, the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) has facilitated two seasons of prayer, two church-wide surveys, a month of guided discussions within the Sunday School structure, and 19 articles in the church newsletter. We have received input from 138 survey respondents, members of 13 Sunday School classes, as well as a small number that shared with the committee through other means.

We have been humbled by the response of the congregation during this process and their prayerful dependence on God’s leadership in what they have shared with us. We have been impressed with the insightful comments that have been offered and the willingness to share openly with the committee. Our focus in processing the many responses from the congregation has been to look for areas of significant agreement as well as to hear recommendations for how the church might better serve the Lord and the community. In all cases, we have looked for patterns of response.

There were many excellent ideas mentioned only by one or a few. To committee chairpersons, cluster leaders, and others in positions of leadership, we would encourage you to honor the input of our members and peruse the full lists of comments that can be available upon request. You very well may find some other constructive ideas that might inspire your thoughts as a leader.

The report that follows is divided into the following sections:

- Areas of agreement
- Areas for further consideration and support for action plans
- Areas for broader discussion and input
- Areas for in-depth study, deliberation, prayer and leadership

NOTE: Wherever percentages are used, that data comes from the survey. In places where input from Sunday School class discussions is used, either in conjunction with survey results or standing alone, it will be stated as such.

NOTE: As with any previous NCD survey or church-wide vote, any reference to input from the ‘congregation,’ ‘members’ or the ‘church’ would, of course, allude to those members who participated in the surveys or the group discussions.

Section 1: Areas of agreement

These are reminiscent of the positive ratings received for many years through the objectives-focused Natural Church Development (NCD) surveys. By far, the response of the congregation is that we continue to see our church as very healthy.

Findings	Recommendations
<p>1. The staff was the top answer (>70%) for what attracted people to ESBC as well as the most impactful factor in keeping them as part of the church.</p> <p>While staff was the most frequent answer for what attracted members to ESBC, quite a few mentioned being influenced by other members of the church, especially in regard to their initial connection with ESBC. Family members and friends were the primary responses (23% and 31%, respectively) when members were asked how they first came to know about ESBC. <i>This suggests that our most effective outreach has followed lines of relationships that members already have.</i> Music and worship style was the 2nd highest factor (>50%) mentioned as something that attracted them to ESBC.</p> <p>2. As for factors that keep members at ESBC, three stood out: ministerial staff (68%), relationships within the church (59%), and music & worship style (46%).</p> <p>Similar to what attracted people to ESBC, relationships and worship tend to hold them here. This is important to remember as we look to the future.</p> <p>3. Regarding the identity and character of the church, there was consistency in the values most often reflective of who we are.</p> <p>Keep in mind that the survey forced members to choose their top three values from a list of very good options. While every option was chosen in survey responses, those chosen most frequently were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loving/compassionate fellowship (69%). “ESBC’s ... loving fellowship creates a safe place to be myself.” • Welcoming (59%). “This church makes people feel welcome and at ease, and the care and support they express to the staff and to each other is unlike my experience in other places.” 	<p>The Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) has no specific recommendations for any of the findings in Section 1 as these are areas in which the church exhibits strength and excellence. May we continue to demonstrate a healthy body life as we love God, love neighbors, and make disciples, both collectively as the church gathered and individually as the church scattered.</p>

- **Theologically sound** (50%). “Theological soundness assures mission and ministry focus.”
- **Supportive** (37%). One member expressed support by saying, “Upon entering ESBC there is a sense of family that we can share our victories and losses.” Another felt supported in personal growth in this way, “I am a better, stronger person because of ESBC!”

4. Another area of agreement expressed by the membership is that most ministries have the right focus and need to continue.

Responding to questions about the ministries of the church (spiritual care/welfare, preschool, children’s, youth, median adult, senior adult, new members, and medical), our members gave high marks to all, ranging from 58% to 82%. **Singles ministry is the only area of ministry on the list that fell below 50% (23%), but it also had the highest response rate of “I don’t know” (>53%).** This suggests that the low score is more a matter of lack of awareness by many congregants rather than an assessment of what is being done in singles ministry.

5. Asked about ESBC’s emphasis on local community missions, domestic humanitarian missions, domestic evangelism-based missions, international humanitarian missions, and international evangelism-based missions, the clear consensus is that the church is placing the right amount of focus on missions.

Member responses ranged from 50% to 67%, representing a healthy affirmation of the emphasis on these areas of ministry.

6. Though the loving/compassionate fellowship and the welcoming nature of the church have already been addressed, there are dimensions that should be noted separately. From the survey (especially the comments), Sunday School class discussions, and comments shared by members with the committee, we have had voices speak to a characteristic of ESBC that could well be described by a phrase from an earlier time: **unity in diversity**.

Members are aware of their differing backgrounds, political affiliations, social status, and economic status, and while there were a few comments that reflected seeing increased polarization within the church, most expressed gratitude that these differences rarely impact the strength of Christian fellowship within the church.

Section 2: Areas for further consideration and support for action plans

A healthy church is always in the process of seeking to improve or expand, whether in terms of numbers or effectiveness of its ministries and missions. This section reflects the creative input from the congregation as to how we can do better and be better as the body of Christ. This was one of the intended goals we had in mind when we decided not to use the NCD surveys for this milestone year but instead to design our own survey that would encourage creative input that could be referred directly to various committees, clusters, and staff members for their consideration.

Findings	Recommendations
<p>1. Worship and Music. was identified by 16% as the 2nd highest cause for hesitancy in joining ESBC. The comments that speak to this are not for sweeping change, but for occasional inclusion of some more contemporary songs, some variety in the order of service, and additional creative elements in worship.</p> <p>2. Local missions was identified for additional consideration. 21% of members indicated that there was “not enough emphasis” on local community missions, which was the highest of the five missions categories. Comments reflected a desire to do more hands-on work, like is done during Operation Inasmuch, but year-round. Partnerships with local organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Triune Mercy Center, and United Ministries to address issues like poverty and homelessness in our home city were also mentioned.</p> <p>3. As mentioned in Section 1.4, singles ministry was identified as needing greater support. “Singles ministry” is used in reference to our work with and outreach to college students and young adults. 22.9% of the members felt that our congregation was placing the right amount of emphasis on singles ministry. Another 22.9% specifically stated that we were not placing enough emphasis on singles ministry. However, 53.45% of the members admitted that they didn’t know enough about our singles ministry to make an assessment. Given the unfamiliarity of many with this ministry, it may be that the support needed is greater visibility.</p>	<p>1. A traditional music and worship style is strongly preferred by our congregation, but with a minority preferring a blend of traditional and modern music. Our recommendation is to refer this to our Minister of Music and Worship as a matter for her awareness.</p> <p>2. Referred to the Missions Cluster for follow-up and development of goals and action plans.</p> <p>3. Referred to the Ministry Cluster for follow-up.</p>

<p>4. Intergenerational activities and/or intergenerational small groups have been suggested as possible ways to connect the generations within our church family. This expressed need emerged primarily in the context of Sunday School class discussions.</p> <p>5. Earle Street Academy is acknowledged as an important ministry of our church. Members indicated in the context of Sunday School class discussions that it is a high priority to make every effort to reopen Earle Street Academy as soon as feasible.</p> <p>6. Members expressed a desire to develop relationships with other churches as a way of getting to know fellow Christians from other Baptist churches, other ethnicities, and/or other denominations.</p> <p>7. Members expressed a need for further discipleship. Some would like training on how to share the gospel in a personal and authentic way. Some expressed need for leadership training.</p>	<p>4. Referred to the Fellowship Cluster for follow-up and development of goals and action plans.</p> <p>5. Referred to deacons, ministerial staff and the Spiritual Growth Cluster for follow-up and development of goals and action plans.</p> <p>6. Referred to the Missions Cluster and Worship Cluster for follow-up and development of goals and action plans.</p> <p>7. Referred to the Spiritual Growth Cluster for follow-up and development of goals and action plans.</p>
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Section 3: Areas for broader discussion and input

These are heart-felt concerns by a statistically significant number of our members which are identified as needing a broader base of support before implementation. Hence, these are referred for consideration, prayerful deliberation, and spirit-led disposition.

Findings	Recommendations
<p>1. Diversity and inclusivity were terms that arose in conversations and were also included in the survey regarding the present life of ESBC. Diversity is “the presence of differences within a given setting.” For the church, this can mean differences in race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, educational level, or any other number of things. Inclusivity, on the other hand, is the “practice of ensuring that people feel a sense of belonging and support” from the church. Another way of looking at it is that diversity is the “what”; inclusivity is the “how.”</p> <p>These were the 2nd and 3rd most common responses to the question of what members would like to see ESBC emphasize more. Each of these garnered around 30% of the responses (34% and 29%, respectively). Consequently, a number of members (34%) observed that we can do better in attracting a more diverse family of faith.</p> <p>2. The importance and value of our on-line presence was strongly affirmed, and consideration of adding to our church staff an individual with social media expertise and website improvements garnered support in Sunday School class discussions and survey comments. Social media and an online presence are increasingly used for information sharing, building a sense of community, and outreach.</p>	<p>1. Referred to the Spiritual Growth Cluster and the Missions Cluster for follow-up and development of goals and action plans.</p> <p>2. Referred to the Personnel Committee of the Administration Cluster and its Deacon representatives for consideration.</p>

Section 4: Areas for in-depth study, deliberation, prayer, and spiritual leadership

These are substantive issues that ESBC (and all churches) will have to address as we seek to be faithful to our Mission Statement and our Greater Way Covenant in an increasingly complex world. Addressing these issues will be guided and led by the spiritual leaders of the church, i.e., Deacons and ministerial staff.

Findings	Recommendations
<p>1. In response to the question “What qualities would you like to see ESBC emphasize more,” slightly more than one-third of the members (34.5%) answered “Open to Discussion About Current Social & Cultural Issues.” Of those issues specified by members answering the survey, the three most frequently mentioned were:</p> <p>a. Issues related to poverty and homelessness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar to comments around wanting to see more local missions (cf. 2.2), members indicated a desire that the church “do more” to support those experiencing poverty and homelessness in our community. <p>b. Issues related to racial justice and racial equity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments indicated a desire for ESBC to be more proactive in addressing issues of racial justice and racial reconciliation in our community. Cooperation with other congregations of different racial makeups was also mentioned as an opportunity. <p>c. Issues related to sexual orientation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comments expressing concern for this issue reflected a desire that ESBC become more aware and understanding of the spiritual needs of the LGBTQ community. Many referred to the language in our mission statement “to be a home to all who would enter.” <p>Given the frequency with which these topics are discussed in the public square, it is commendable that our members are wanting to explore these topics from the vantage point of their faith and within the forum of their family of faith. We concur with this healthy quest to examine and live out our faith in a manner consistent with our Mission Statement and The Greater Way.</p>	<p>1. Because of the depth of these issues, we recommend that the deacons and ministerial staff prayerfully consider how best to address these topics in the context of our congregation, especially considering the high value our congregation places on unity in diversity.</p>

2. In response to the question of what gave people hesitancy when joining ESBC, denominational affiliation was the most common response (22%). About three-fourths of the members that gave this response provided comments that specifically indicated concerns about Southern Baptist Convention affiliation. With an awareness that the deacons and ministerial staff already have taken the initiative in examining and evaluating our relationship with the SBC, we concur with this approach.

2. We recommend that the deacons and ministerial staff continue reviewing our relationship with the SBC, especially in light of the letters to the congregation sent on June 13, 2022, and June 23, 2022, addressing issues that arose within the SBC after the survey was taken. Both letters represented a good model of keeping church members aware of our current affiliations.

Conclusion

Much of what we have presented represents adjustments and calibrations that will make what we are already doing even better. Small changes can mean a lot. But we also know that some of the suggestions offered have the potential to result in more noticeable changes if implemented. The thought of change can be unsettling, but ongoing change was built into the DNA of Earle Street Baptist Church from day one. On the very day ESBC was organized, March 12, 1922, Dr. W. T. Derieux cautioned the church against getting too comfortable by saying, “No church, no minister, can ever justly reach the conclusion that it has attained all that it should attain.” We are fortunate to have had forebears who had the courage to make decisions that have shaped ESBC into the healthy church with a vital mission to our community and the world that it is today.

In the years to come, may it be that others will look back at their forebears (*us*) with gratitude for the decisions that we make in these inaugural months and years of our second century, even though some of those decisions bring change. And may each of these decisions be prayerfully considered and faithfully executed to the glory of God and for the ongoing good health of His church and its mission to our community and the world.

Respectfully submitted,
David Newton, chairman
Grey Register, vice-chairman
Ed Hogan
Sharon Youkey
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Acknowledgement

The members of the Strategic Planning Committee submitting this report express gratitude to two former members of our committee for their contributions early in the process - Bruce Schoonmaker and Mark Plasters. We also acknowledge and express our appreciation to Pastor Stephen Clyborne and Minister of Administration Denise Plumblee. Without their unfailing cooperation and assistance, this report would have been more challenging.