

Feasibility Study Report
for
The Williamstown Meetinghouse Preservation Fund

WILLIAMSTOWN, MA
AUGUST 2021



AT THE INTERSECTION
OF HERITAGE, FAITH,
& COMMUNITY

Partners for Sacred Places

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THANK YOU

First Congregational is an irreplaceable asset and vital part of its community, and its central location both in town and the Williams College campus is enviable. While there is much work ahead for the Williamstown Meetinghouse Preservation Fund Board and congregation, Partners for Sacred Places has little doubt that, with commitment and perseverance, they will reach their goal of a successful capital campaign, benefitting the congregation and the community of Williamstown.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the staff, volunteers, and clergy whose cooperation and dedication helped make this feasibility study both possible and a wonderful personal experience. It has been a pleasure to work with The Williamstown Meeting House Preservation Fund Board so intensively throughout this process, and we are extremely grateful for the opportunity to be involved in your growth. We look forward to a continuing relationship with First Congregational and the WMPF as they take their next steps toward a bright future.

Sincerely, 



Rev. Bridget Fidler
Senior Consultant



Gianfranco Grande
Executive Vice President



Emily Sajdak
Project Manager

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Williamstown Meetinghouse Preservation Fund (WMPF), a 501(c)3 organization formed by First Congregational Church to maintain and restore its historic meetinghouse, contracted with Partners for Sacred Places (Partners) to conduct a feasibility study ahead of launching a potential capital campaign to restore and renovate its physical plant, including, but not limited to, repairs to the roof and steeple, critical safety and accessibility improvements, and elevator installation to provide access to the upper and lower floors of the meetinghouse.

In the late spring of 2021, Partners conducted 40 interviews to gauge opportunities in the following areas:

- Capacity of the congregation, 501(c)3, and their leadership bodies to take on a capital campaign
- Perception of First Congregational Church among congregants and community members
- Gift potential of interested and committed donors
- Community investment in the building and potential capital campaign

Based on interviews and related research, Partners recommends the WMPF Board focus its fundraising efforts to raise \$2,500,000 in two phases for building renovations, repairs, and the structural needs of the roof and steeple of the historic meetinghouse. The first phase of \$1.5 million focusing on the roof, steeple and building accessibility. The second phase of \$1 million focusing on the ventilation system and other upgrades to the building. This goal reflects the current capacity indicated by most of the congregation and the investment of the community of Williamstown in preserving the meetinghouse. Members of First Congregational Church and the surrounding community must see this effort as a benefit to the community of Williamstown and Williams College; successful fundraising will be contingent upon a compelling message and donor relations strategy targeted towards congregants, Williams College alums, and the wider community.

METHODOLOGY

In carrying out this feasibility study, Partners staff conducted a series of confidential interviews both via Zoom and over the phone with individuals representing a wide range of congregation and community constituencies. The leadership and staff of the WMPF selected and invited interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and each interviewee was asked a set of questions across several categories to generate consistent and reliable data.

Using the results, alongside independent research, Partners developed the following analysis of First Congregational Church, its place in the community of Williamstown and the surrounding area, and the viability of a capital campaign to support the rehabilitation and revitalization of its physical plant.



The front of First Congregational Church clearly expresses its concern and passion for social justice.

SECTION I: FINDINGS

Project Priorities

The First Congregational Church building is an incredible asset, and its iconic status is recognized by congregation and community members alike. If one searches for Williamstown, MA, a photo of the church building is the primary image that appears, and many interviewees noted that the church building is in every photograph of Williams College. With its central location and its concern for justice and community outreach, it is not surprising that the church members interviewed expressed their desire for the church to be a meeting place for community groups and a community service hub. While repairs to the meetinghouse roof and steeple are urgent and necessary, some members of the congregation and the WMPF Board would also like the campaign to include creation of an upper floor to the building and an elevator installation to increase accessibility and usage by both the congregation and community residents.



Image that appears to the right of the results of a Google search for “Williamstown, MA”.

As part of the feasibility study interviews, Partners discussed the tentative plans for repairs, restoration and priority projects for the congregation and community. Most of the members interviewed were familiar with the building’s structural needs, in part thanks to a comprehensive building assessment conducted in 2018. The Rev. Mark Longhurst, the minister at the time, organized several congregational forums to discuss the church’s options. Although some felt that the congregation did not have the capacity to surmount the building’s significant needs, most were in a favor of remaining in and preserving the building. Community members were for the most part unaware of the need to rehabilitate the meetinghouse. The following list includes projects on the list for repair and rehabilitation:

- Roof replacement and steeple repair
- Increasing accessibility to the lower and upper floors by installing an elevator
- Increasing office space capacity for diversified community use to provide rental income
- Increasing ventilation and replacing the boiler

- Preserving the aesthetic of the interior and exterior of the meetinghouse

Along with sealing the envelope of the meetinghouse, many congregants wanted to prioritize renovating the upstairs space for community use. In interviews with the WMPF planning team, Partners' staff heard detailed descriptions of the proposed renovations and cost. Partners staff found community members were not aware of the urgent need for rehabilitation of the meetinghouse and were unclear about the goals of the project. When told of the urgency and scope of the campaign, community interviewees expressed various levels of interest in supporting the congregation's efforts. Partners recommends the WMPF Board continue to increase community support and enthusiasm for the campaign by increasing external communication about the need and plans for the capital improvement project.

Interviewees' overall love and recognition of the building's potential was obvious throughout the study. All church members interviewed want to see more engagement efforts with the community and a church building full of activity throughout the week. Partners staff also noted a fervent desire from the community members to see the building used to its full capacity, both a home for a vibrant congregation and a community center for the Northern Berkshire region.

Capacity

*The Reverend Mark Seifried
(Transitional Minister)*

The Reverend Mark Seifried has served as interim minister at First Congregational since August 2020, following a succession of contentious pastorates that challenged the church for several years (prior to the Rev. Mark Longhurst who brought unity to the congregation during his time). Members described Rev. Seifried as a key asset and credited him for the church's stability and vitality during the pandemic and a major pastoral transition. Many deeply appreciate his preaching style and his spiritual support to an aging congregation during a very difficult and isolating year. His approach to ministry is straightforward and intuitive, and his innovation and creativity in creating virtual worship during the pandemic was also valued. A number wished that he could come on as the settled pastor. Interviewees described him as "warm and caring but not sentimental" and "ministering to everyone." His ideas, listening skills, experience, and the knowledge he brings to the governance and life of the congregation are deeply appreciated.

Because the pandemic has made community interaction and engagement more difficult, the community members interviewed were mostly unfamiliar with Rev. Seifried. Many knew of First Congregational and its previous pastors, especially Rev. Mark Longhurst. Rev. Seifried plans to use the building to reconnect with the community in the post-COVID period to help the town heal from the trauma and grief caused by

the pandemic and recent political divisions in Williamstown. Almost all community stakeholders interviewed spoke of the church and its pastors as having been an asset to the community and its organizations.

As noted above, Rev. Mark Longhurst (the previous minister) was a breath of fresh air who brought the congregation together and elevated its profile in the community for a decade. Although there were many positive comments about Rev. Longhurst, the congregation is still feeling stung by his “sudden” departure. Many members credit the Rev. Longhurst in moving the church toward thinking about new ways of doing things. When the Centerline Architects Building Assessment was delivered, he helped establish church forums to determine what the congregation’s next steps should be and where the majority stood on whether to stay in the building and restore it. The congregation’s decision to save the building led to the next question of how they were going to accomplish this herculean task. In early 2020, the church formed a task force to explore a capital campaign and Rev. Longhurst left in February 2020.

Bridget Spann (Community Outreach Organizer)

First Congregational hired Bridget Spann in 2018 as a part-time Community Outreach Organizer as part of the church’s commitment to social justice and community outreach. Since very few congregations have outreach staff, Bridget’s presence in the community makes a statement, impresses community partners, and gives First Congregational credibility. Her work focuses on supporting immigrant families through partnerships with community organizations (such as the Berkshire Interfaith Committee), Williams College students, and the other religious communities in the area. She also coordinated events with speakers, including book, film, and panel discussions.

Although the pandemic stopped much of the volunteer work with immigrant families in the community, Bridget has worked directly with the families without help from volunteers. Once it is safe to do so, she will need to reengage with interested church and community volunteers to be able to provide support. Bridget’s work during the pandemic has also focused more on outreach to aging congregants challenged by increased isolation, and she has also done some powerful programming with the Diversity, Inclusion and Racial Equity (DIRE) group.

Interviewees commented on Bridget’s strong voice in the community, especially as she reaches out by advertising events with posters and on Facebook and the church’s Outreach and Ministry Team took out an ad in the local paper opposing Christian nationalism. The team was recognized in 2019 by the Berkshire Taconic Foundation when they received the DeMayo Bright Futures Award for their collaborative work in supporting immigrants in Northern Berkshire County.

First Congregational Lay Leadership and Volunteers

Overall, members interviewed considered the lay leadership to be strong with areas of development especially around finances. As in many congregations of its size, a small but strong group of individuals handles much of the work being done; this group should be celebrated for their commitment to the church. Even in the interviews, congregants recognized that much of the reason the church navigated the pandemic was because of the efforts of the staff and lay leadership. Although the current leadership is strong, many of them are well past retirement age and the burden of leadership falls on this core group of individuals. First Congregational will need to recruit some younger members - who interviewees noted were active and wonderful, but few - into some of the open and soon to be available leadership roles.

Developing a succession plan will help with transitions by creating continuity from one program year to the next. An intentional effort to grow the leadership and volunteer pool at First Congregational would protect the church against loss of institutional knowledge and wisdom and allow long-serving leaders to rest and “recharge” for further service to the congregation. The question of how to cultivate and grow new leaders within an increasingly virtual environment will take time to figure out.

Some contradictory messages came across about the staffing of the church. Some members raised questions about the duties and responsibilities of the part-time staff and concerns that staff weren’t being used as effectively putting too much responsibility on the shoulders of lay leadership. Others stated that the church is over-staffed for its size: “They’re hiring out ministry. The staff is engaged and working hard to fulfill what the congregation wants them to do. Stewardship of time and talent is not that great. The congregation is older and they may not have the capacity to do what they used to.” Evaluating staff roles and communicating those clearly to church members will be an important component of this transition period for the church. How does the congregation want to steward the time and talents of their staff and laity to best serve the mission of the church?

Williamstown Meetinghouse Preservation Fund Board

First Congregational Church and the Williamstown Meetinghouse Preservation Fund are blessed with a dedicated and talented group of leaders. One interviewee stated that the WMPF leadership is “a strong, passionate team with the right set of skills.” Church members appreciate that they have been proactive by consulting with professionals to get a solid building assessment and conducting a feasibility study to assist the church as they weigh their building options.

With the WMPF being such a new organization, Partners staff also noted a lack of clarity surrounding the separate roles and responsibilities of the church and the nonprofit. While this is unsurprising and will take some effort to determine, clarifying the purpose and role of each organization, especially related to the care and maintenance of the building, will be critical for moving forward with a capital campaign.

Overall, the congregation is impressed with the WMPF and their work thus far. Some interviewees thought that more education about the work and focus of the WMPF is needed. Questions were raised about the focus of the nonprofit and whether its purpose is solely for capital projects and how the WMPF will interface with the greater community. Others wondered how the community will distinguish between the church and the WMPF? Will people really see the church as a community center?

Communication

Internal

The congregation of First Congregational is generally well-informed about events and activities associated with congregational life, such as worship, Bible studies, classes, and concerts.

External

First Congregational has a strong identity in Williamstown as a progressive, social justice, politically active group. The front entrance to the church prominently displays Black Lives Matter and rainbow banners, clearly communicating the values of the congregation. Although congregants acknowledge they may well have an image of the rich, snooty social justice church, community members remarked on the banners that advertise First Congregational as a place that is open, welcoming, and affirming to people of all different identities and backgrounds – a message that is appreciated by many in the community. Several members credit Rev. Longhurst with increased outreach efforts over the past few years. Many church members spread the word through their active participation in civic activities, running local businesses, and working on Williams College staff or as active alums.

“First Congregational plays an active social convening and service function – arguably more so than any of the other churches in town.” It is often the first place that most people think of as church in the community, partially because of its visibility on Main Street and its active role in a range of social justice issues, community outreach, and service activities among the community groups (e.g., the ABC (A Better Community) Sale, Hoosic River Watershed Association, Minerva Arts Center, blood drives, bridge games, Rainbow Seniors, Boy Scouts, etc.). A counseling service, although reduced in size, is still in the building and

paying for office space. First Congregational is known in the community for their popular Second Hour events which go back several years. Presentations by college professors from Williams College and the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts bring in community members. Even the few programs and talks given during pandemic have received excellent reviews.

As noted in the preceding paragraph, First Congregational has several partner relationships with outside groups that should be highlighted and publicized more. Some ideas for where First Congregational could highlight community partnerships are simple fixes. For example, one interviewee noted that there is no signage in the church for outside groups that meet there, and when a recent collaboration with Williams College to use an empty storefront on Spring Street for the ABC Sale was not better promoted as a partnership effort.

Communication channels with Williams College are particularly critical as the First Congregational building is the gateway to the campus, which causes some confusion for a fair number of Williams College students and members of the community who think the church is part of Williams College. Even with its prominence in Williamstown, many residents do not know the extent of the repair needs of the meetinghouse. Moving forward, all members of the congregation should take part in further raising the church's profile in the town and educating community members and Williams College alums about the relationship between the college and First Congregational. Some had strong feeling that the success of this campaign is critical to propel First Congregational toward a central position in the community, further showing that the building serves the mission and the mission-oriented service work of both the congregation and the community.

First Congregational's digital presence, especially its Facebook page, provides visibility to the church's activities and events. Regular posts on the Facebook page - including a variety of content about worship services, opportunities to engage in congregational and community activities, and the values that the congregation holds around social justice and its strong UCC identity - are critical toward maintaining engagement. While many of the recent posts relate specifically to virtual worship, that should shift as the pandemic wanes and more activities return to the church.

Gift and Funding Potential

Stewardship Culture at First Congregational

Annual stewardship trends and a congregation's regular giving culture provide valuable insight into both a campaign's viability and the best strategies for successful fundraising. Interviewees described the congregation as having an "awkward relationship with money," and church members expressed their

concerns about how stewardship is conducted. According to the budget provided to Partners, a fairly typical 50% of the congregation pledged for 2020, totaling \$228,593. However, 60% of the budget is supported by 14 families, many of whom are elderly. Some others contribute under \$200 a year to the church. An effort to make stewardship more visible – education about why pledging is important and increasing the number of members and friends who give electronically – will provide a stronger and steadier income stream. Engaging members to think more about church finances and how investments are managed may bring about more interest in the church’s financial well-being.

Currently, First Congregational is operating in a stable financial state to meet facility, staffing, and congregational needs despite losing some very large donors in recent years and experiencing a culture-shifting pandemic. The church has been fortunate to receive several large bequests, raising the endowment to approximately \$2,600,000 from which the church draws 3 to 4.5% annually from the interest of the endowment. Members have differing opinions regarding how the endowment should be managed. Some believe the church should be conservative and save for a rainy day. Others interviewed believe the church is too conservative, and the money isn’t growing at the rate that it could be. The church tends towards prudence regarding financial matters, and one interviewee wondered if the congregation has chosen deferred maintenance in favor of a balanced budget, or if the church has done better financially because they weren’t spending money in the same way during the pandemic. Many members agreed that financial management has been a real challenge, and the leadership has been working to improve this situation with mixed success. The Stewardship Committee is now actively working on further corrections to the church’s financial systems.

Preparation for a capital campaign will provide First Congregational the opportunity to examine its culture of giving and financial stewardship and to evaluate it in terms of long-term sustainability and internal capacity to fund church staff and programs. Defining the relationship between the church and the WMPF will be key to the success of both the general operating budget and the Preservation Fund. A successful capital campaign relies on full participation of the congregation, signifying that every member is invested in the physical improvement and preservation of the sacred space. This all-church investment is also a positive signal to outside funders about the health and viability of the church. The most recent capital campaign to update the kitchen and Community Hall successfully raised \$325,000, \$25,000 over the goal. This illustrates that with the right messaging and engagement with the congregation, investment in building stewardship is attainable.

Congregational Support

Interviewees supported a capital campaign, and strong consensus exists to preserve the building for both congregation and the community. Many interviewees saw the rehabilitation project as an opportunity to increase community engagement that is worthy of their financial resources. From Partners' perspective, the WMPF has the dedication and resources from the congregation to pursue a capital campaign for the repair of the steeple, improve accessibility, and restore the meetinghouse. A capital campaign would be an opportunity as well, to deal with the unresolved issues around Rev. Longhurst's sudden departure and to clarify the church's relationship with Williams College.

Generally, but not exclusively, an accepted standard for determining the feasibility of a campaign goal is to identify a lead gift (or gifts) between 20 to 30 percent of the overall goal. For a campaign at First Congregational, with an overall goal of \$2,500,000, Partners identified around \$225,000 in lead gifts from 5 congregation members (out of 21 members interviewed) who were ready to discuss gift amounts. Partners believes that if the congregation works to strengthen its culture and understanding of financial stewardship that congregation members will increase their campaign gift amounts. Not every interviewee was prepared to name the amount they might contribute, but almost all expressed a desire to give. Achieving universal commitment to give among membership is rare but profoundly important to the success of a congregation's fundraising efforts. Such a commitment would allow First Congregational to approach the wider community knowing that it is fully supported by the congregation.

Potential for External Support

Data from Partners' past campaigns indicates that up to 39 percent of funding in community-wide capital campaigns for historic sacred places comes from individuals, foundations, and other entities outside the congregation. For WMPF, a successful capital campaign will hinge on participation from community stakeholders and partners, in addition to pledges from the congregation. This will also require energizing potential donors with a captivating vision, scope of work, and case to demonstrate how First Congregational's structural improvements would directly impact community vitality beyond the needs of the congregation.

Because planned work will surely benefit the community-at-large, representatives from Williamstown should serve on the capital campaign steering committee in order to help the WMPF craft a case for support and guide the campaign. Campaign leadership should focus on defining compelling reasons for various types of funders to give, which will generate both broad community appeal and a raised congregational profile among funders with very specific interests. Outside donors, whether individuals or foundations,

will need to be made aware of the building's outsized value and the capital campaign. While a multitude of avenues for funding (e.g., crowdfunding) exist, most will be minimally significant to a campaign's success. Partners recommends an external fundraising strategy that focuses time and energy on efforts that hold significant potential for the WMPF's project.

The WMPF must position their case to be about the value of the building and not about religion. The WMPF should be able to leverage the iconic status of the building in the community to generate needed funds to support the rehabilitation of the historic meetinghouse. However, even with the strong awareness of the building, one community interviewee wasn't sure how that would translate into generous community support. Others expressed confusion about the relationship between the college and the church or how the WMPF would distinguish itself from the church. The community must know that not only are they saving a structure, they are also gaining an important asset for the community.

Campaign promotion also elicited a variety of opinions. Some saw the he "church building as a community space" argument as a nonstarter because it wouldn't raise enough revenue. Many church and community interviewees noted that Williams College alums tend to have a soft spot for First Congregational because the building and the steeple are a tangible part of the image (and memories) of the campus, and they don't want to see the church building fall apart. One community member stated that they were somewhat reluctant to make significant gift to a campaign that Williams wasn't supporting financially in a major way. A good marketing plan for the campaign will be essential, including a plan to transition campaign leadership primarily to the WMPF Board.

Town funding of religious organizations often creates a debate and Williamstown is no exception, and there was some pushback when First Congregational received a small Community Preservation Grant. This was, in part, the impetus for developing the WMPF. The WMPF will focus solely on intentionally and strategically on building relationships with funders (both individual and institutional) over the long-term to support the preservation of the meetinghouse, which should be clearly communicated to the congregation and the community.

Partners identified the following resources and opportunities that would be a good "fit" for the WMPF's capital improvement project:

- Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation¹

This foundation has a Fund for Williamstown, with an advisory board made up of community members. The Fund for Williamstown is a modest grant that seeks to support creative, artistic, life-enhancing projects that improve the life of community and the residents of Williamstown. Larger grants would come through their donor advisors, individuals, and families that have funds with the Berkshire Taconic Foundation. Partners recommends that the WMPF Board share campaign information with the Foundation advisory board so that they are aware of the meetinghouse's needs when donors are considered. Interviewees suggested that the WMPF Board be transparent with the Foundation about the size of a gift from Williams College to convey the need for community donors to support the campaign.

- Williams College

Opinions varied greatly as to whether the college would be interested in financially supporting the campaign in a significant way. It was clear from many community interviewees that Williams College wouldn't be an anchor donor and needs to be approached strategically. Williams has a history of donating to the community where it serves their mission and needs of their staff and students and has supported building restoration projects in the past, but competition is stiff. Every nonprofit in the Northern Berkshires wants to appeal to Williams.

- Community Preservation ACT Grant

First Congregational has received a Community Preservation Grant in the past. The creation of the WMPF with its focus on building preservation, makes it far more highly likely that another grant for the restoration of the meetinghouse would be awarded.

- Williams College Alumni

A significant number of alums have strong Williamstown ties and give back to the community in a variety of ways. Members of the WMPF Board are aware of who the Williams alums with homes in Williamstown are and whether they would be potential donors. Partners recommends looking into whether any of the alums have family foundations that would support campaign.

It is customary that a congregation can internally raise between two to three times their annual stewardship income for a capital campaign. After the scope of work is defined and the final campaign message codified, Partners believes that a higher dollar amount could be reached through increased giving among more reticent donors and from individual community residents.

¹ Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation's Fund for Williamstown:
<https://www.berkshiretaconic.org/bReceivebNonprofitsIndividuals/SearchApplyforGrants/FundforWilliamstown.aspx>.

SECTION II: COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Perception

First Congregational Church has a long history with Williamstown and Williams College, and heritage and preservation in New England are high priorities and matter more than in some other regions of the country. Williamstown values its heritage as a small, rural community, exemplified by the extensive interest in environmental conservation and where approximately 60% of the land is protected.

First Congregational makes good use of their building, and interviewees had a variety of opinions about how the space opportunities at First Congregational could be leveraged for expanded relationships with outside organizations. Some interviewees thought that small nonprofits might make use of expanded community space, and others thought it wasn't enough of a draw or revenue generator. Some community interviewees think the town needs functional community space. Others mentioned that the sanctuary is underutilized and considered the possibility of making that space more user-friendly by removing the pews.

Many interviewees mentioned the two other church buildings in Williamstown that have been sold and repurposed in the past six to eight years. The old Methodist church on Route 43 and Main Street is now a thriving child care center, and the former Roman Catholic Church was converted to an apartment building. This awareness of sacred buildings being repurposed and sold could work to First Congregational's benefit in helping the town consider the ways in which a house of worship can benefit the community outside of religious purposes.

The WMPF Board should conduct a deeper study to decide what the community space needs are and what makes the most sense. The WMPF Board and the church will need to consider how proactively they want to be when it comes to renovating and upgrading the space so that it's renter ready. "If we do this right, it will be the central point of the community. We need this mission building center and our work and the view of this congregation that we are community and mission oriented. Not there yet. It has a wonderful potential." Conducting a space assessment could be a helpful tool for figuring out how to optimize the underutilized space at First Congregational. Likewise, conducting a Community Asset Mapping would provide an opportunity for existing and potential community partners to join First Congregational in assessing their building, programmatic and talent assets to strengthen their identity as a community center.

Existing Relationships and Outreach

Williams College

Many described the relationship between the church and the college as friendly and cooperative, e.g., parking spaces for snow plowing, volunteer support for the tag sales, and a shared passion for social justice issues: “Williams can be a great neighbor when it wants to be.” A church member stated, “Each side knows who has the power. Sometimes the college forgets that the church isn’t part of the college. Leadership changes and people forget.”

In terms of real estate, the college dominates the center of Williamstown, owning almost everything except for the church. Frequently, interviewees raised the question of how invested the college is in the First Congregational Church building. In the early 2000’s when the church offered to sell its building to the college, they only offered \$100,000. Many wondered whether the college would be interested in using renovated church space as the college has hesitated to build additional offices for employees. Some spoke of the possibility of creating an annex at the church for Williams College Center for Learning and Action. The Center and First Congregational have developed a successful partnership on several social justice projects and tag sales, but some consider relocating the Center to be prohibitively difficult as students have expressed hesitancy in attending programs located in a church building.

Some influential people from the Williams College attend or care about First Congregational and could give their seal of approval for support. Although interviewees highlighted some possible maintenance benefits to Williams purchasing the church building and renting it back to the church, church members interviewed were wary of a long-term rental agreement with Williams and the limits to church autonomy that it would set.

Tag Sales

Interviewees most frequently mentioned the tag sales as a ministry or activity for which First Congregational is known. First Congregational hosts four clothing sales a year.

- The spring Earth Day sale is held on the Williams College lawn and in the church Community Hall.
- In September, a sale is held throughout the church building and brings in people from all over the region.
- The Holiday Walk Sale is also very popular during the Christmas season.

A Better Community (ABC) formed a partnership with First Congregational years ago, ABC is now a much smaller non-profit organization that raises money for community service organizations. The clothing sales hosted by First Congregational are now the only active source of outreach and revenue.

These sales have raised \$50,000 for families and children in need. Another collaboration between First Congregational, ABC and Williams College was born when the College provided rent free space for a December-January pop-up store on Spring St. during the pandemic. The rent-free agreement was extended for another year and raised \$8,000 to local food pantries in 2020.

The “Giant Tag Sale” is not only one of the most well-known events at the church, it is another example of how First Congregational partners with Williams College. The spring “Give It Up” campaign is a collaborative effort that supports both the church and the college’s efforts to be green by taking in student discards that are refreshed and resold in the fall to incoming students. Volunteers from the church and students from the Williams Center for Learning in Action come together to prepare items for sale.



Tag sale items ready for purchase

SECTION III: RECOMMENDATIONS

It is in both the WMPF's and the congregation's interest - and their shared responsibility - to work collaboratively to define and implement a plan to preserve the meetinghouse. Raising WMPF's profile will be essential to identify and secure external funding and support for the capital campaign, as well as ongoing maintenance and preservation expenses. First Congregational must also raise the awareness of its external impact on Williamstown by continuing to strengthen relationships with community organizations, Williams College, town officials, and influential stakeholders. The church should also cultivate a culture of stewardship founded on transparent and open communication surrounding church finances and financial giving as a spiritual discipline.

Raise the First Congregational Church's Profile

As First Congregational looks to build support among the Williamstown community for its ministry, restoration, and prominence in the downtown area, Partners recommends that the congregation and the WMPF both identify and promote engagement with the wider community. The church has already taken great strides in the past few years to increase awareness of its significant history and relationship to Williamstown, including setting up the WMPF to as an independent nonprofit organization to preserve and steward the historic church building.

The church should also begin crafting and communicating the compelling reasons behind community support for building restoration and maintenance in preparation for a capital campaign. First Congregational should make strategic use of the compelling data available through the Halo valuation study done in 2021. According to the valuation, First Congregational generates \$1,335,485 annually in economic impact, including \$370,692 of economic impact to the invisible safety net of the community. These are powerful numbers that can be used to provide perspective in annual reporting, inform space sharing policy, as well as strengthen First Congregational's support as part of an upcoming capital campaign.

Strengthen the Williamstown Meetinghouse Preservation Fund's Capacity

As the WMPF defines a strategic vision for its own growth, it should engage with First Congregational's clergy and lay leadership to define and affirm the roles and responsibilities of each entity. It will be important to ensure that the relationship remains collaborative, and that neither the congregation nor the

organization see their work as totally independent from the other. There are many ways to ensure open communication and collaboration between the two, and are not limited to formalized and documented structures. Partners recommends that both the church and the WMPF review policies, practices, and procedures to determine how best to prevent each institution from becoming siloed from the other and to encourage congregational buy-in to WMPF's fundraising efforts.

- **Use the WMPF to Expand the Volunteer Pool for Building Stewardship**

The WMPF can recruit volunteers from other organizations or communities that might be reluctant to work for a church to which they have no personal connection. The WMPF can engage individuals from other churches, community programs, and neighborhoods to create a volunteer pool that is not only larger, but also more diverse than one that a congregation might be able to recruit.

- **Clarity of Purpose**

The WMPF will need to create a crystal-clear case as to why the community, and specifically Williams College, should support the campaign effort. If Williams' mission is to educate its students and not community development, why should Williams care about the preservation of the church building? What benefit is it to the college, other than its placement in the center of their campus? The WMPF will need to be strategic and innovative in its efforts to think outside the box and seek to use perceived weaknesses to their advantage. Or to quote the author, Malcom Gladwell, *"We have, I think, a very rigid and limited definition of what an advantage is. We think of things as helpful that actually aren't and think of other things as unhelpful that in reality leave us stronger and wiser."*²

Strengthen Congregational Stewardship

In addition to clear vision and enthusiasm, campaigns require high rates of internal pledge participation and an attitude of "sacrificial" giving among congregation members. Many congregations struggle to strike a balance between encouragement of financial generosity, respect for each individual's giving capacity, and a de-emphasis on the importance of wealth for discipleship. Mainline Protestant churches often express an aversion to soliciting donations from members openly, in fear of promoting some version of a prosperity gospel. However, open and honest dialogue about financial stewardship does not have to be uncomfortable or seen as a "necessary evil" for a congregation. Strengthening and balancing First Congregational's uneven pledging indicates will improve members' financial investment in the church. Partners recommends that

² Malcolm Gladwell, *David and Goliath: Underdogs, Misfits and the Art of Battling Giants*

congregational leadership take the following steps to increase pledge rates for the capital campaign as well as improve congregational understanding of, and comfort with, the church's finances:

- **Develop a year-round stewardship program** that incorporates messages about giving and generosity throughout the church year, weaving conversation about giving and resources more intentionally into the everyday life of the congregation. Structuring a stewardship program similarly to a capital campaign - specifically by having a dedicated team lead the initiative and composing a compelling case statement - is an effective practice in preparing for a campaign and in increasing annual income.
- **Facilitate open dialogue about First Congregational's financial situation**, including current holdings, operational budget, actual expenditures, and sources of income. A clear communication strategy would affirm individual congregation members' investment in the maintenance and preservation of the building, as well as the ministries in which First Congregational takes pride. Specific projects might include creating a narrative budget, publishing updated expenses and income on a regular basis in the church bulletin, and highlighting stories about what offerings and financial gifts have made possible.
- **Implement a robust approach to planned giving** in collaboration with denominational leadership. Planned giving is an important initiative for every congregation, and especially so for First Congregational as many congregants are aging. An intentional strategy for planned giving, including member education and assistance, will help the long-term sustainability of the congregation and its ministries. It will provide opportunities to ensure that bequests and other planned gifts are designated for initiatives and projects that align with a unified vision for First Congregational and the WMPF and their future.
- **Emphasize giving as a discipline and spiritual practice** that allows congregants to see fundraising (and individual giving) as a spiritual discipline. Interpreting fundraising theologically can make individual giving more attractive by helping congregants see that the act deepens their faith, demonstrates commitment to the ministry of First Congregational, and empowers them to live out their values. Additionally, faith and lay leaders should begin modeling a culture of giving - and "break the ice" of open financial conversations - by publicly discussing their own understanding and theology of stewardship.
- **Share the results of the Economic Halo Valuation with the congregation and the community.** Recognizing the financial impact that First Congregational makes on Williamstown

and the greater Northern Berkshire region shifts the congregation's perception of how the church connects and transforms the community.

Enhance Communication

Many church members credit the Rev. Mark Longhurst with bringing internal church communications into the 21st century. Regular e-blasts began 5 years ago and increasing numbers of older members can now get online with help from church staff. Additionally, First Congregational's website has a warm and welcoming presence. The information is particularly geared toward those seeking a place to worship, find community and get involved in social justice issues. The social and environmental justice page is full of information and descriptions of church & wider community partnerships, especially around immigrant and racial justice. First Congregational's values are clearly stated, providing an understanding of who they are and what is important to them.

However, communication can always be improved. Some members felt that more could be done to educate the congregation about the WMPF and raised questions about the future roles and responsibilities of the organization. This does not come as a surprise given that the WMPF is such a new organization, but as more is done to clarify the roles and responsibilities of the Preservation Fund and the church, it will be critical to explain this in clear ways internally. Adding information about the Preservation Fund to the website will help members of the church and the community learn more about the endeavor to preserve First Congregational's iconic building.

Space assessment/Asset-Based Community Development

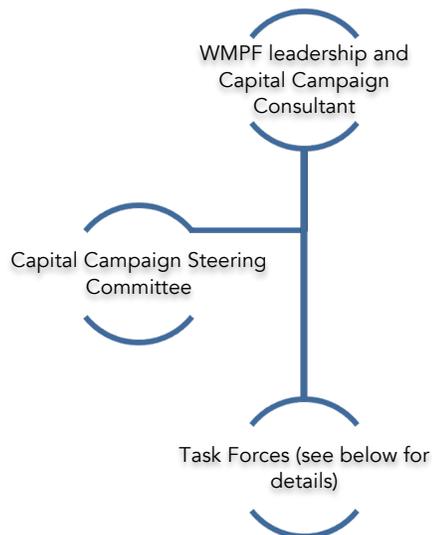
Partners recommends that First Congregational and the WMPF engage in two community-building events led by Partners before embarking on a capital campaign.

The space assessment is a day long process in which Partners staff tour the congregation's existing spaces, and analyze their current use(s), sizes/configuration, amenities, and other features. This includes a physical review of the space and interviews with key-administrative staff (or volunteers). The assessment identifies attitudes towards existing partnerships and potential partnerships, and the types of programs or ministries that could be a match for the character of the congregation and the WMPF, its location and facilities; all of which are included in the final report.

The asset-mapping event takes place over 2 hours and would include the congregation, representatives from Williams College and other community stakeholders and, organizations that could reignite some energy and imagination around how the building can be used as well as identify leadership within the congregation. Asset-mapping will identify new partners and collaborators in the wider community, providing important insight for First Congregational and the WMPF about how to connect its assets with the gifts and talents of the Northern Berkshire region and lay the groundwork for stronger partnerships now and into the future. After the conclusion of the asset-mapping event, Partners will synthesize the information generated at the event for the congregation. This summary will lay the foundation for fundraising and communications work to support repairs, renovations, and new collaborations and programs.

Build a transparent and accessible campaign infrastructure

The Williamstown Meetinghouse Preservation Fund is in a good position to move forward with planning for a capital campaign, and should the Preservation Fund Board elect to do so, will need to begin thinking about how to structure a team to effectively steward the campaign throughout its timeline. While WMPF has dedicated and passionate volunteers in leadership roles, a capital campaign will require recruiting additional volunteers from both the congregation and the community. This can be an exciting opportunity for the WMPF and First Congregational to develop and grow their leadership and begin to open up



communication channels about the campaign. Partners recommends the above campaign structure.

WMPF leadership and the Capital Campaign Consultant would be responsible for:

- Working with Board members to identify and recruit Steering Committee members
- Providing oversight and management of steering committee, including establishing a capital campaign timeline and deadlines for deliverables
- Meeting with individual donors and foundation program officers to solicit gifts.

The capital campaign steering committee should include representatives from each of the constituencies the WMPF hopes to tap in its fundraising efforts. Major donors must also be approached to serve on the committee, potentially in a chair or co-chair capacity.

Duties of the steering committee include:

- Acting as an Advisory Board
- Determining campaign structure, policy, and staffing
- Authorizing campaign expenditures
- Soliciting advance gifts and participating in the “ask” process
- Recruiting new steering committee and task force members
- Approving campaign materials; coordinating events, activities, and public relations; overseeing volunteers
- Evaluating results and revising strategy if needed
- Leveraging strategic relationships to recruit new donors to the campaign
- Providing oversight of individual task forces, with chairpersons of each task force reporting to the steering committee (see below)

Task forces, as the name suggests, are designed to work towards the completion of a single objective. Once that task has been completed, the associated task force can be dissolved. This allows potential campaign volunteers with limited time and gifts or experience in development, research, writing, editing, and graphic design to take ownership over a defined piece of the campaign without overwhelming them.

Partners’ generally recommended task forces are the:

- *Community Task Force*: responsible for identifying, cultivating, and leveraging relationships in the community; increasing space-sharing partnerships; and welcoming people into First Congregational. The Community Task Force collaborates closely with the Communications Task Force to ensure relevant marketing of its work.

- *Diaspora Task Force*: Connecting with First Congregational’s diaspora will be an important piece of campaign work. This task force is responsible for identifying, cultivating, and leveraging relationships with past members of First Congregational.
- *Individual Donor Task Force*: Responsible for reviewing potential donors to the capital campaign, researching giving capacity, and prioritizing and sorting donors into the “Pyramid of Gifts.” This group will also assist in matching donors to gift solicitors based on their relationship to the project.
- *Development Task Force*: Responsible for researching grant opportunities, completing necessary application documents, and grant reporting.
- *Case Statement Task Force*: Responsible for creating a formal case statement that can appeal to both First Congregational membership and the greater community of Williamstown. The case statement is the “business card” of a capital campaign, succinctly presenting a compelling case for support.
- *Project Management Task Force*: Responsible for working with the architect(s) and general contractor(s) throughout the design and construction process.
- *Communications Task Force*: Responsible for creating campaign materials, developing a social media strategy, and maintaining social media accounts. This is a great way to include youth and their skillsets!

APPENDIX: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Rob Abel	Phil Smith
Carolyn Behr	Sam and Elizabeth Smith
John and Judy Blackmer	Bridget Spann
Bill Bowden	Lauren Stevens
Duncan Brown	John and Martha Storey
Lynn Chick	Kelly Sweet
Susan Clarke	Jennifer Trainer Thompson
Paula Consolini	John Umlauf
Linda Conway	Susan Yates
Liz and Tom Costley	Larry and Judy Wright
John and Barbara Craig	
Lynne DeLay	
David Dewey	
Joseph Finnegan	
Bruce Grinnell	
Sherwood Guernsey	
Jason Hoch	
Andy Hogeland	
Sam Humes	
Jim Kolesar	
Michelle Lopez	
Margaret & Magnus McComish	
Nancy McIntire	
Paul Neely	
Bill and Gail Oberst	
Maeve O'Dea	
Margaret Oxtoby	
Dick and Carol Paul	
Bo Peabody	
Susan Puddester	
Lynn and Allen Rork	
Rev. Mark Seifried	
Cesar Silva	
Anne Skinner	