

St. Paul's Community Church

Church Vitality Grant Application

Project Description

St. Paul's is an urban community church. Our location on a busy residential block in Ohio City is key to our identity; St. Paul's identifies itself as a neighborhood church. We are an active member of our community and seek to provide a space where all are welcomed and affirmed. We are known for our radical hospitality, and our sense of mission is shaped by our belief in the dignity and belovedness of all God's children. We reflect the diversity of our immediate neighborhood, and strive to showcase God's kin-dom on earth through love in action.

The Ohio City neighborhood is a sought-after neighborhood located in close proximity to downtown Cleveland. Originally, it was home to Eastern European descendants, but "white flight" and the rise of suburban living in the middle of the twentieth century increased the percentage of African Americans and Latinx residents. In recent years, the City of Cleveland has lured redevelopers to Ohio City by offering tax incentives, and now many long-time residents are being forced out of their homes. The influx of high-end townhomes and redeveloped historical homes have brought new residents to Ohio City, many of them middle to upper middle class white families. Between 2010 and 2021, the neighborhood within 1.5 of St. Paul's has seen a 70% increase in per capita income. Gentrification has occurred at a rapid pace, and Ohio City is now seeing a rise in racial tensions.

St. Paul's Community Church is located at a cross-roads in Ohio City. The streets surrounding the church have seen a large increase in redevelopment or new home builds, though there are a few apartment blocks in close proximity to the church that have resisted gentrification. Many low-income or underhoused residents still seek out St. Paul's outreach services such as our food pantry, thrift store, and rental and utility assistance, though our immediate neighbors now have different needs and means of engagement. Whereas in the past we have relied upon word of mouth communication, our current neighbors connect and receive information through a digital format.

St. Paul's has a long history going back to the 1960's of being a place of refuge and safety for anyone in the community who is looking for help. We currently operate an outreach program for the homeless and lower-income neighbors which is a reflection of our faith and ministry. Because St. Paul's has a strong history of advocacy and outreach in our community, we have a long list of persons who are "Friends of St. Paul's" but not necessarily church-goers. We currently use Flocknote (a communication website specifically designed for churches), and we send a digital newsletter weekly to remind our worship community of activities at the church and in our neighborhood. We are currently working to create a separate communication list for our "Friends of St. Paul's" to provide monthly updates about our outreach program.

Our current average attendance on Sundays has declined during covid. Before the pandemic weekly attendance was about 40 with many members who have been with us 20 years or more, and many new faces. During the pandemic we have averaged about 20 members for Sunday service, and when we are in-person that number is supplemented by some 15 to 20 non-members who join us on a semi regular basis. Many of these come in from all walks of life to find the peace and quiet and some just for a place to rest their bodies for a moment. All know that they are welcome and treated with dignity and respect.

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for churches to have a stronger digital presence. Traditionally, St. Paul's has not made a strong use of technologies or social media. Because of both the pandemic and our changing neighborhood, word-of-mouth is no longer effective; we have had a steep learning curve in learning and utilizing available technologies. We sought assistance from Avon Lake UCC, and in the past year we have grown to regularly use Zoom, Facebook, and a digital newsletter (Flocknote) to send weekly updates about events at the church. This has helped the congregation stay connected during a time of social distancing. These changes have been well-received, though we are still in need of a stronger digital presence.

Several changes in our programming for the coming year reflect our renewed focus and attention toward meeting the needs of our neighborhood as they are changing. While all of our non-essential activities ceased during the pandemic, our church leadership used the time to reassess the current needs in our neighborhood. During the pandemic, we began hosting "Neighborhood Gatherings". While initially these gatherings were an opportunity to hear and discuss safety concerns from our immediate neighbors at a time when crime in the neighborhood was increasing, they have transitioned into fellowship and informational gatherings. St. Paul's is a neighborhood church, and so our programming and usage of our space should reflect the demographics in our neighborhood. Recent demographic changes have brought an increase in families; in 2021, 65% of the population within a 1.5-mile radius of the church is composed of family units. To meet the growing need of child care and youth-centered programming, we will be offering a child-enrichment and after school program. In addition, we are partnering with Near West Recreation to provide space for youth sporting teams.

Our church was built in 1960, we are blessed with a simple, beautiful sanctuary that has movable pews and a lovely altar. A large cross is illuminated at night and can be seen from the street and is a symbol of hope in the neighborhood. The church is one-floor, fully accessible, with a number of classrooms, multi-purpose rooms, a full-size gymnasium with basketball hoops, and a thrift shop addition with storage rooms and a separate customer entrance. We have developed partnerships with many local community organizations to use our church facility, including Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries that maintains an overflow homeless shelter in our gymnasium 6 nights a week. Pre-pandemic, our church building was used regularly 24 hours a day.

The church is well-maintained and well-used, and always in need of maintenance, repair and loving care. In the last five years we have completed two capital campaigns, raising over \$250,000 from friends and local foundations to replace all the church windows, put on a new roof, new doors and locks and repaint. Through the grace of God, we have been able to maintain our building. We have some capital funds remaining which will be used to begin renovating the

bathrooms. We have a wonderful outdoor courtyard; the gardens are beautiful and maintained by church volunteers. In the summer of 2021 we were able to worship outside each week, keeping safe and socially distanced while providing a strong presence to neighbors.

A significant amount of our giving comes from a small nucleus of our members, a strong nucleus of friends in the surrounding community and several large suburban churches. Almost all who come through our doors contribute in one way or another. Some of our members and many of our occasional attendees are those with limited or no income and they simply do not have much to share. But, on a regular basis, they give; our collection plate always has a significant amount of change tinkling in from those who choose to share what little they have. This is often supplemented by a consistent number who step forward and volunteer to help in any way that is needed. This can range from sweeping to set up to being part of our service. Over the years, this has been a key ingredient in our ability to make the most out of a rather small budget.

This grant will help us streamline communications, communicate our mission, and find ways to meaningfully engage with our changing neighborhood. For example, one of our church programs that can benefit from a more effective marketing and communication strategy is our thrift store. Our thrift store is a hidden gem in the Ohio City neighborhood; it is beloved and has created a strong sense of community that caters to all demographics of our gentrifying neighborhood. It is a favorite of both low-income and higher-income individuals. Our connections with more affluent suburban churches leads to a steady stream of higher-end items, and the prices are set very low so that resources are made accessible to those who need the items the most. It is a welcoming place for all people in our diverse neighborhood. Based upon the small community that frequent the store, we traditionally needed to market the thrift store only through word of mouth. But new residents and the quick-changing nature of our neighborhood mandate the use of social media and communications technology in order to promote itself. While it is well-poised to make a profit, we are only able to break even based upon the lack of publicity. If we were able to take advantage of digital marketing strategies we could promote the thrift store.

St. Paul's is a vibrant, spirit-filled community. One of our strengths is our flexibility; our commitment is to our neighborhood and our mission of living out the gospel, rather than to a sense of tradition or "the way things have always been done". This ability to discern the call of God wherever it leads us makes St. Paul's strongly suited to discern and meet the changes within our community. While the answer to "who is our neighbor?" has changed, St. Paul's commitment to living out the gospel in our immediate neighborhood has not.

Financial Sustainability

St. Paul's Community Church is in a unique position financially. Although we have a small church budget (approximately \$137,000 per year), we are blessed with a diversity of revenue sources that makes us strong and mighty. Our revenue sources look like this:

- Member pledges and individual gifts: 28%

- Rental Income (including rent from the Outreach program which has its own budget and governing board; gym space rentals; AA/NA rentals; and a contract with Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries to house the overnight men's shelter 5 nights per week): 30%
- Federated Church of Chagrin Falls: 20%
- Other partner churches: 4%
- Thrift Shop: 5%
- Other, including the Church Vitality Grant: 13%

During the last 3 years we reached two important financial goals. The first is that our own member pledges and gifts now exceed the amount we receive in support from our Sister Church in Chagrin Falls. This is very important and has been a goal for a long time. St. Paul's would not exist today as a church with a Full-Time Pastor without the meaningful support from Federated Church. We have a strong and deep friendship with the Federated Church. However, we want to be respectful of their financial needs, and we want to become less reliant on any one source of income over time. Building our own member support is one important way. The other is to develop relationship with other UCC churches. Avon Lake UCC now supports St. Paul's financially, as does Middleburgh Heights UCC.

The second step we took towards sustainability was to create contracts with local agencies for use of our gym. Our old rental-income model relied on individual basketball groups, which was difficult to administer and came with security challenges. The pandemic gave us an opportunity to rethink the model while the gym was closed due to covid. Now we are partnering a number of organizations - Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries, Djapo Dance Group, and Near West Recreation program, for use of space. These partnerships provide more financial support than individual rentals, and take less time for us to administer.

Over the next 5 years, our goal is to continue to grow and sustains these financial trends:

- Increase St. Paul's member pledges and support – both in total number of pledging units and in the total annual dollars
- Decrease reliance on Federated Church and cultivate relationships with other UCC churches for financial and spiritual support – Work directly with Federated Church on a sustainability funding plan that works for both churches and can be planned over the next 5 years
- Increase rental income from non-profit partnerships that also fit with our mission – in addition to continuing the relationships with Djapo, Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries, and Near West Rec, we want to add a Child-Care / after school care program to take advantage of our classroom facilities, and develop another partnership for use of the basketball gym in the summer time (a local camp or rec program).

The Church Vitality grant is essential to our sustainability plans, because 1) it will provide needed resources now to support our full-time pastor position and 2) it will support the creation of a part-time Communications Specialist who will help us to reach more neighbors and friends with our message, grow member pledges and connect our mission to suburban church partners through social media and electronic newsletters. The communications strategy is critical to our sustainability plans.