

Long Range Plan: 2016-2021
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

Mission Statement: Led by the Holy Spirit, LaGrave's members seek to worship and serve God in all of life, transforming His world and being transformed to reflect the character of Christ.

A WITNESS, A CALL AND A VISION

“If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” Hebrews 11:15-16

In late 1887 a large group of people gathered for a ground breaking on LaGrave Avenue near Cherry Street. Men in dark wool suits with tight fitting vests, women wearing ankle length dresses with frilly collars, children in church clothes running around; they were all there to lay the cornerstone of the Fourth Holland Christian Reformed Church.

This new congregation – soon to be renamed the LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church – was the first English speaking congregation in the denomination. Speaking English in worship was a bold, ground-breaking step. The entire denomination previously had been committed to holding worship services solely in its members' Dutch mother tongue. Dutch worship had served as a comfortable wall, preserving safety within, keeping out the uncertainties of the modern English-speaking world.

Visionary leaders, though, saw that the language of the next generation was changing. The church needed to sacrifice the comfort of a language wall that was keeping others out. The old, old story of the gospel needed to find a new voice.

At the ceremony, Reverend J. Y. DeBaun stood up and addressed the assembled faithful. He said that he hoped *“that the church would be an honor to its members, the neighborhood, and the city, and that it would redound to the best welfare of the church-at-large.”*

These men and women took a leap of faith. Their future was uncertain, but they had a witness of God's faithfulness in the past, a sense of God's call in the present, and a vision of a better city ahead.

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Seventy years later, in the late 1950's, the original founders' vision had indeed been blessed; LaGrave Church was now a large and vibrant congregation. But the building whose cornerstone they laid back in 1887 was beginning to crumble. The congregation faced a choice: rebuild in the heart of the city, or move out to the suburbs.

It was not an easy choice. Grand Rapids' core city was also crumbling. Crime was up and neighborhoods were decaying. Businesses, residents, and churches were leaving for the greener pastures of the suburbs where crime was low and growth was everywhere. Many congregation members thought LaGrave should move too.

But after a lot of prayer and discussion, the congregation decided to stay. The decision surprised many. The suburbs were booming and LaGrave would almost certainly grow briskly there.

Reverend Jacob Eppinga explained the decision in a June 1960 *Reformed Journal* article. LaGrave wanted to remain downtown because "*downtown churches have opportunities for witness presented to them which the neighborhood churches do not.*" The article concluded with these words: "*And so we will make this difficult neighborhood our parish. We are confident that if we remain loyal to the gospel, and diligent in presenting it to the lost who live within the shadow of our spire, as well as to the community-at-large, God will keep us as a congregation and make us to be vital and to be strong.*"

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God blessed the vision of that 1960 congregation as well. LaGrave has grown to a family numbering over 1800 souls; people from all generations and all sorts of backgrounds. The city around us has changed too! After decades of struggle, downtown Grand Rapids is booming. Businesses are moving back and so are the

people. All along the skyline construction cranes spin and dip over the steel shells of new buildings.

This growth brings fresh challenges and new questions. How do we shine the light of Jesus in this changing environment? How do we reach the new young professionals moving into our neighborhoods while continuing to care for the needy neighbors who still fill our streets? How do we tell the old, old story of the gospel in a new voice?

The new strategic plan attempts to meet these new challenges. After much prayer, and listening to church members and gathering feedback from church committees and formally surveying the congregation, and then praying some more, the Strategic Planning committee has prepared this five-year plan.

This plan is built on the foundation of the past. We love our church. Nothing this document proposes is a significant change of direction. But, in addition to loving our church, we also imagine new programs; we expect fresh promptings of the Spirit; and we dream of even greater faithfulness.

Will every element of this plan bear fruit? None of us can know. Our future remains uncertain. Yet we still have a witness of God's faithfulness in the past, a sense of God's call in the present, and a compelling vision of a better city ahead.

PILLARS FROM PAST PLANS

This is the fourth long-range plan adopted by LaGrave Church in recent decades. It is rooted in the same commitments as LaGrave's previous plans.

- **CONFESSING:** LaGrave Christian Reformed Church will be a confessing community, committed to upholding historic Reformed creeds and confessions. Our members will understand and embrace LaGrave's mission of transformation. We will declare and share that mission by our daily words and actions.
- **WORSHIPING:** LaGrave Christian Reformed Church will be a worshipping community, committed to maintaining a tradition of formal worship that integrates articulate and intelligent preaching of God's word with excellent music that glorifies God.

- **CARING:** LaGrave Christian Reformed Church will be a caring community, committed to caring for the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of its members and actively enfolded members, visitors and neighbors into a community of love and care.
- **DISCIPLING:** LaGrave Christian Reformed Church will be a discipling community, committed to following Jesus Christ and to helping others follow Jesus, through growing congregational participation in educational programs and discipling ministries.
- **WITNESSING AND SERVING:** LaGrave Christian Reformed Church will be a witnessing and serving community, committed to outreach to the poor and the powerful, nearby and far away, through growing member involvement in evangelism, missions and Christian compassion.

PLAN ELEMENTS

A CONFESSING COMMUNITY: As Reformed Christians who believe that our world belongs to God, that Jesus is Lord of every square inch of creation, and that the Holy Spirit is producing new life in all areas of our lives, we recommit ourselves to transforming our lives, our communities, and our world.

LaGrave's central focus has always been the Gospel message. We hold fast to faith that is grounded in Scripture and illuminated by historic creeds and confessions. We resolve not to be conformed to the fashions of this world, but rather to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, and further to be faithful agents of transformation in our community and our world.

Actions:

- To keep this Reformed vision of transformation before our minds and hearts, we will regularly integrate our creeds and confessions into preaching and liturgy, education for all ages, and instruction of new believers.

Responsibility: Elders, ministers, Worship Committee, Growing U, Youth Education Committee, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee

A WORSHIPING COMMUNITY: We will be a worshipping community. We will maintain and build on our tradition of formal worship that integrates both insightful preaching of God’s Word and excellent music that glorifies God.

LaGrave members greatly appreciate LaGrave’s traditional worship. In the 2015 member survey, members strongly agreed that “Our worship services incorporate relevant Biblical teaching that helps me apply scripture to my life” and “Our worship services provide me with the opportunity for reflection and prayer.” Likewise, members strongly agreed that our worship services “incorporate meaningful worship music and congregational singing.”

On the other hand, members also expressed a desire for greater intergenerational worship leadership. That leadership could take a variety of forms.

Actions:

- We will maintain strong biblical preaching supported by music, visual art, and liturgy. *Responsibility: Worship Committee, ministers*
- We will develop opportunities to increase intergenerational participation in worship. *Responsibility: Worship Committee*
- We will review the use of lay leaders in worship and make a recommendation to Council. *Responsibility: Worship Committee*

A CARING COMMUNITY: We will be a caring community, committed to caring for the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of our members, and actively enrolling members, visitors and neighbors into a community of love and care.

LaGrave members are generally satisfied with the care and support the church offers to its members. Most members agree that LaGrave provides adequate opportunity for prayer requests to be shared and known. Most LaGrave members are satisfied with the church's ministries to widows and widowers, shut-ins, and those affected by long-term illness.

Yet a substantial body of LaGrave members believe that the church could improve its ministries to specific groups of people, including people experiencing marital problems, people struggling with abuse, divorced persons and their families, members drifting away from church, people struggling with addiction, and persons struggling with sexual orientation or identity.

As a Christian community we must reach out and embrace our members who are dealing with struggles and losses, whether old or new. We must assure our brothers and sisters of our Lord's abiding love for them, and of our own continuing friendship and support for them as they go through difficult times.

Many LaGrave members think the church could do a better job of welcoming visitors. Further, many LaGrave members express a desire for greater church fellowship opportunities. Our church's size poses logistical challenges in integrating members into the active life of the church. While some members prefer a low profile at church, other members, particularly newer members, say they want more help getting to know people and becoming involved in church activities. A significant number of LaGrave members believe the church could do more to communicate opportunities to join small groups.

Actions:

- We will be a grace-filled congregation that is prepared to lovingly support individuals and families experiencing hurt that they may be hesitant to share. *Responsibility: All LaGrave Members*
- We will evaluate and publicize current support resources available for individuals and families experiencing painful events and struggles.

Responsibility: Pastoral Care Committee, Minister of Pastoral Care, Elders, Deacons

- We will identify potential additional resources to support hurting individuals and families and make all of these resources available to the congregation. *Responsibility: Pastoral Care Committee, Minister of Pastoral Care, Elders, Deacons*
- We will increase opportunities for small group engagement across all age groups. *Responsibility: Spiritual Formation and Service Committee, Fellowship Committee, Welcoming Committee*
- We will compile a list of all small group opportunities (e.g., fellowship, study, service, etc.) and communicate this information using multiple media. *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Fellowship Committee, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee, Welcoming Committee*
- We will develop three or more new affinity-based small groups. *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Fellowship Committee, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*
- We will review best small-group practices of other congregations *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Fellowship Committee, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*
- We will explore the possibility of new midsize groups and activities for enhancing engagement and fellowship. *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Fellowship Committee*
- We will communicate the needs and blessings of members by linking patient websites (e.g., Care Pages) and other relevant updates to the church website. *Responsibility: Communications Committee, Pastoral Care Committee, Minister of Congregational Care*

A DISCIPLING COMMUNITY: We will be a discipling community, committed to following Jesus Christ and to helping others follow Jesus, through growing congregational participation in educational programs and discipling ministries.

A key task of the church is to lead people to follow Jesus. At LaGrave, that has meant not only faithful preaching of the Word, but also regular church education and encouragement of faith-formation practices. We also actively support Christian day-school education.

LaGrave members are generally satisfied with how the church fosters spiritual growth of its members. One exception is that LaGrave members express less-than-average satisfaction with the resources LaGrave offers to support personal and family devotions. And some members say they would appreciate mid-week materials to help them to follow up on just-completed services, or to prepare for upcoming worship.

LaGrave members express appreciation for Growing U programs, though the number of people who actively attend those programs could be larger.

Teens express great satisfaction with the ET/CREW program. With respect to the youth church school program, there is a divergence of views. Adults say they are “very satisfied” with the way our church school program meets the needs of children and young people. Teens, by contrast, are considerably less satisfied with their church school experience.

To some degree, perhaps to a large degree, that divergence of views is inevitable. Teens (including those of us who used to be teens) most often do not appreciate catechism or church education at the time we participate in it. But as a church we need to do our best to make every child’s church school experience meaningful. There are no disciples (current and future) more precious to us than our own church’s children.

Actions:

- We will identify proven tools and best practice programs that enhance spiritual formation and discipleship. *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*

- We will provide materials and activities directly aimed at helping families in the work of spiritual formation in the home. *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*
- We will expand the use of materials to support mid-week worship preparation and reflection. *Responsibility: Minister of Preaching, Worship Committee, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*
- We will develop a list of characteristics for communal and individual spiritual health and hold them up to the congregation for self-evaluation. *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Minister of Preaching, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*
- We will ensure the continuation of intergenerational prayer partners. *Responsibility: Youth Education Committee, Minister of Youth*
- We will continue to coordinate Growing U with sermons and other aspects of worship when possible. *Responsibility: Minister of Preaching, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*
- We will continue to develop a comprehensive prayer ministry program. *Responsibility: Minister of Discipleship, Spiritual Formation and Service Committee*
- We will review best church education practices of other congregations. *Responsibility: Youth Education Committee, Minister of Youth*
- We will oversee Sunday morning Church School and related programming that is engaging and educational for all ages. *Responsibility: Youth Education Committee, Minister of Youth*
- We will ensure that both church and parents are committed to the Sunday morning Church School program. *Responsibility: Elders, Minister of Youth*
- We will sustain our commitment to Christian education, emphasize its value through Christian Education Sunday, and share the vision of Christian education with new members. *Responsibility: Christian Education Committee, Finance Committee, Minister of Preaching, Minister of Youth*

A WITNESSING AND SERVING COMMUNITY: We will be a witnessing and serving community, committed to outreach to the poor and the powerful, nearby and far away, through growing member involvement in evangelism, missions and Christian compassion.

A church must serve the needy. When we serve the poor and marginalized, we serve our Lord himself.

Many LaGrave members are actively involved in serving the needy. LaGrave members are involved in attending and supporting the Celebration Fellowship Prison Church, which meets in the Bellamy Creek Prison in Ionia. Members participate in tutoring activities for children, and in building houses for families. Our GEMS and Boy Scout programs reach out to the children in the downtown community.

As a church, we provide extensive financial support for downtown ministries. In addition, LaGrave members are active in many non-church organizations that provide help to individuals and families, both locally and around the world.

In our 2015 survey, LaGrave members expressed satisfaction with the financial support and volunteer support that LaGrave offers to the community. LaGrave members are also satisfied with LaGrave's efforts at partnering with other organizations within the downtown community.

However, many LaGrave members feel ill-equipped to engage in personal evangelism, or to offer personal faith testimony to people around them. We want to make sure that our outreach is not limited to physical help; we want to share the gospel in both word and deed.

Actions:

- We will cultivate deep relationships with two existing organizations that we can specifically support and help grow. *Responsibility: Minister of Outreach, Social Concerns Committee, Evangelistic Outreach Committee*
- We will develop one new outreach/evangelism program aimed at downtown. *Responsibility: Minister of Outreach, Social Concerns Committee, Evangelistic Outreach Committee*

- We will improve awareness of existing ministries, including opportunities, training, and support. *Responsibility: Minister of Outreach, Social Concerns Committee, Evangelistic Outreach Committee*
- We will continue to explore planting a church downtown. *Responsibility: Council, Minister of Outreach.*
- We will develop a program and materials that will help members reach out to people in their everyday life and expose those people to the Christian faith. *Responsibility: Evangelistic Outreach Committee, Minister of Outreach*

A MISSION-MINDED COMMUNITY: We will obey our Lord's command that we preach the gospel to every nation.

Our Lord's last command before he returned to his Father was that his disciples go and preach the good news to every nation.

Historically, LaGrave has been strongly committed to obeying that command. For many decades, LaGrave has sent missionaries and healthcare workers to all parts of the world.

Likewise today, LaGrave continues to actively support missionaries around the world. Both the Missions Committee and the Henry Beets Mission Society provide support for missionaries and others working to spread the gospel, a total of 30 missionaries and families. In addition, LaGrave sends groups of adults and youth to Cuba and other foreign countries to support mission efforts.

In the 2015 member survey, LaGrave members expressed continued support for our missionaries. Members think, though, that the church could do a better job communicating the needs and activities of individual missionaries. Members are also unclear about the respective roles of the Missions Committee and the Henry Beets Mission Society.

Actions:

- We will re-examine the roles of the Henry Beets Mission Society and the Missions Committee and our overall missions strategy. *Responsibility: Missions Committee, Henry Beets Mission Society, Minister of Outreach*
- We will communicate the work of individual missionaries in new ways to increase awareness within the congregation. *Responsibility: Communications Committee, Missions Committee, Henry Beets Mission Society, Minister of Outreach*
- We will improve communication between members and missionaries. *Responsibility: Communications Committee, Missions Committee, Henry Beets Mission Society, Minister of Outreach*
- We will renew and strengthen our commitment to providing financial support to missionaries. *Responsibility: Missions Committee, Henry Beets Mission Society, Minister of Outreach, Finance Committee*

- We will consider strategies for helping missionaries develop effective fund raising initiatives. *Responsibility: Missions Committee, Henry Beets Mission Society, Minister of Outreach*
- We will continue to strengthen our relationship with the Cuban Christian Reformed churches. *Responsibility: Cuba Committee, Henry Beets Mission Society, Minister of Outreach*
- We will continue to support our members, including youth, in mission trips and share the fruits of these trips with the congregation. *Responsibility: Youth Education Committee, Communications Committee, Minister of Youth, Missions Committee, Minister of Outreach*

A COMMUNITY PROPERLY ORGANIZED AND SUPPORTED BY ADEQUATE INFRASTRUCTURE: We will assure that our church committees and ministries are properly organized. We will assure that our church maintains physical, financial and communications infrastructure that will adequately support our church's ministries.

The elements of this plan require not only time and effort, but also proper organization and infrastructure support.

Ministers and committees need to know their responsibilities. Volunteers need to feel supported in their work.

Our church property must be well-maintained and safe. We need up-to-date tools for communications. And we need adequate financial support for all of our church's programs and activities.

As LaGrave membership and ministries continue to grow, the church must periodically re-evaluate its expectations of volunteers and staff in carrying out critical church functions. In this regard, LaGrave should seek out and learn from the experiences of other growing churches.

Actions:

- We will create a standard format for committee mandates. Each standing committee's mandate will include responsibilities assigned to that committee under the church's strategic plan. We will also create a standard form for committee annual reports to council. The annual report form will focus on specific actions the committee has taken (or plans to take) to advance each item in the committee's mandate. *Responsibility: Council, committee chairs*
- We will develop a more functional website and other technology tools to facilitate and enhance communication of LaGrave's ministries. Those ministries include small groups, volunteerism, church school, Growing U, missions, spiritual growth, evangelism, committee work, fellowship and administrative functions. *Responsibility: Communications Committee, Finance Committee*

- o We will consider appropriate communications staffing for LaGrave to help maximize the use of available communication tools. *Responsibility: Communications Committee*
- o We will evaluate new methods (e.g., app, video announcements, weekly electronic updates, Facebook, etc.) for reaching members and non-members with information about LaGrave. *Responsibility: Communications Committee, Minister of Discipleship*
- We will maintain and enhance a functional database of volunteer gifts and interests in order to match them with needs and opportunities within the congregation. *Responsibility: Volunteer Coordinator, Minister of Discipleship, Welcoming Committee*
- We will continually evaluate the church's budget and financial position to ensure the sustainability of essential church ministries and staffing. *Responsibility: Finance Committee*
 - o We will develop a contingency plan in the event of a budget shortfall. *Responsibility: Finance Committee*
 - o We will develop a fund for future technology improvements and maintenance. *Responsibility: Finance Committee, Communications Committee*
 - o We will maintain a fund for future facility improvements and maintenance. *Responsibility: Finance Committee, Facilities Committee*
 - o We will encourage the use of electronic fund transfer to facilitate balanced monthly giving throughout the budget year. *Responsibility: Finance Committee*
 - o We will pursue ways to encourage estate gifts to LaGrave Church. *Responsibility: Planned Giving Committee*
- We will carry out a comprehensive review of church security and implement changes to promote the safety of the congregation. *Responsibility: Facilities Committee*

- We will review the current parking and make recommendations for improvements. *Responsibility: Facilities Committee*
- We will evaluate the potential for acquisition of properties around the church to support future growth. *Responsibility: Facilities Committee, Finance Committee*