

## Mission Study 2024 for Westhampton Presbyterian Church

### Our Community Demographics

Located 81 miles from New York City, Westhampton Presbyterian Church is in Westhampton Beach. This is part of the famous “Hamptons,” which are noted for being the playground of the rich and famous. We are only a mile from incredible sandy ocean beaches. There is a hypnotic draw to our sunny skies, sparkling waves, and soothing breezes that have drawn summer crowds for more than a hundred years. In the winter, a short hike can reveal seals resting on the sandbars or allow a tranquil stroll alone on the empty beach. The village is noted for its upscale shopping venues and excellent restaurants, so clearly this is not a typical Long Island village.



### Demographics and How They Affect Us

Most people who live here are white, with a high median income, yet nearly 10% live below the poverty line. Almost half of recent home sales have been more than one million dollars; this May, the median listing price was 1.6 million dollars. Rents are high here.

Our population increases in summer as visitors or seasonal residents—who live in summer mansions that stand empty the rest of the year—fill our beaches, shops, and restaurants. Typically, those who occupy summer homes on Dune Road along the ocean do not stay and send their children to local schools in the fall. We do have some summer visitors who say they love the small-town charm of our chapel, but our flock lives here year-round. We aren't fabulously wealthy. We don't live in mansions or have posh vacation homes. We represent the *real community*. Our members are current or retired teachers and nurses, lawyers and police officers, entrepreneurs and small business owners, real estate agents and the like.

One of the ways our area's demographics and geography affect us is that the ocean breezes draw our members to the beach as well. This plays a role in our drop in worship attendance in summer. Our people are also the beach workers and the lifeguards; they work on Sunday and can't come to church.

We are gravely concerned with the huge jump in real estate prices in the last few years. Because the cost of living has become so high, our congregation is less and less able to afford to live near the church. Some are traveling long distances. Where once middle-class people were able to buy modest homes here and raise our families, that's no longer the case. We believe this will make it more difficult to grow our congregation, as we would like, with new, young families. Many will not be able to afford to live here, including our own young adult children who have grown up in the church.

Our demographics have been good in some ways, however, for our schools. Mansions owners pay high real estate taxes, so the schools are well-funded. Computers are handed out, and lunches are free for everybody. Additionally, we are a feeder school district. Because our school system is consistently highly rated, with a high school graduation rate of 94.1% and college graduation rate at 64.1%, other school's districts pay tuition to send their students to us for middle and high schools. Perhaps because we see the result of hard work creating wealth around us, our students tend to strive upward.

It is also true that our demographics hurt us in the schools. Student enrollment is dropping because new young families can't afford real estate prices, and the schools have a plan to reduce the number of teachers, leaving some who have served for years without jobs.

### **A Brief History and our Facilities**

Many of our members say that the history of the church is important to them and are proud of it. Westhampton Presbyterian was organized as a congregation in 1742. The original building was taken down in 1831, but the congregation used the boards from the first structure to build a new church. That building was replaced in 1888 and remains our worship home. We love our building where we gather for worship and fellowship every Sunday. We have heard that a hundred years ago you could see the ocean from the front of the church! Some of our members were raised in this building and some of the family names have stayed the same on our member rolls going back more than 280 years.



Our church is a well-maintained structure with 19th century architecture. It has air conditioning, a whole-building fire-suppression system, and technology that allows us to livestream our services for those who cannot worship in person. We would like to continue our maintenance and upgrades to the property, including upgrading our kitchen to meet modern codes for community dinners, and repaving our parking lot.

Another much-loved part of the church is our memorial garden. Our community of faith may have cremated remains, in the context of a funeral service, buried in the tree-lined, shaded brick circle behind the church. A curved wall lists the names of those who are buried. We strongly wish this heritage to continue as we see it connecting our past, present, and future.





Across the street is a six-bedroom manse from the 1800s, recently renovated and ready for the next 50 years. The windows have been replaced with Anderson windows. The septic system has been replaced with an eco-friendly system. A new boiler and dishwasher have been installed, and the trees have been trimmed to improve the health of the yard and protect the building. The manse has a two-car garage and a private backyard, plus a large front porch.



In addition to our sanctuary, we have a chapel a village away that we use for early services in summer, small weddings, and worship on Christmas Eve and Holy Thursday. The chapel has heat and air conditioning, but no bathroom. The chapel is especially popular in summer. It is on a tiny plot of grass, so we are limited in our options for the property, but it has fresh paint inside and out and is an icon in the village of Quogue.



## **Our People**

We have 199 people on our rolls. Attendance in worship has been about 60-70 people. The greatest percentage of members have been with us for 20 years or more. A significant number of people have been here more than 50 years. We draw from 16 villages in our area, with our people driving an average of two to ten miles to get here, and a few driving as many as thirty miles. One reason for that is that other churches have closed or lost their youth and their parishioners have joined with us. Another reason is that ours is the only church out here that has a choir, and our music is a draw. We are in our 60s, 70s and 80s primarily, but we have folks in middle age and a number of young people with children.

## **Survey of the Congregation**

We wrote a survey of twenty questions to gauge what our members, friends, and visitors think about our church and hopes for our future pastor. We handed it out on the day we recognize Sunday School teachers and the choir, and gather for our church picnic. We also put the survey into our email list for people who weren't able to attend. We followed up all month at services, reminding, passing out new sheets, and by the end of the month, we had 81 surveys filled out. At the end of the survey period, we celebrated with a bagel and lemonade party after church and shared the results.

Our survey respondents overwhelmingly said that they worship with us regularly. When asked if they watched our service online, the majority said no or only when they are away or can't come. Since the survey was given out in church, it isn't a surprise that people said they are regulars in attendance, but the survey was also sent out as an email to our whole mailing list.

What brought you here, we asked, and family was the strongest answer, followed by friends, children's program, choir, and the minister who was the pastor at the time. One response was "looking for a hope injection," and that's always a good answer.

We asked if our respondents' spiritual needs are being met here, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. There were suggestions, of course, like adding Bible study and time for discussion of the struggles of living the Christian life, and complaints, like noise before the service starts, but many commented on loving the sermons and prayers and feeling fulfilled.

So, since you come to church, which aspects of the church do you most enjoy? The first answer by far was for the fellowship and community. During COVID the really serious deprivation was the fact that we didn't see each other. Many of us may not have large social circles elsewhere, but church makes up for what Zoom will never provide. Our coffee hour, our picnics, our fundraiser dinners at people's homes, our Christmas celebrations and more make us feel like a community. When we need prayer for our troubles our friends know us and care for us. The smartest thing any pastor could do for this church is to encourage times for us to get together and talk (and eat, it goes without saying).

The second greatest sense of enjoyment in our church comes from the music. We are told that few churches out our way have choirs now or are down to a group of a few people. Our recent choir recognition service had 19 singers in all four voice ranges singing, and even on a low Sunday there would be at least eight singers. Our leader is a longtime music teacher with high standards who chooses classically themed church standard music. The survey asked what we thought of the music, wondering if people wanted change, and the overwhelming answer was that we love it just as it is. Favorite hymns were songs such as, "Here I am, Lord," "Amazing Grace," and "Lord of the Dance." We love it when one of our youth plays an instrument or sings a solo, and we love it on the rare occasions when we have a cherub choir sing. Our organ is a genuine pipe organ with real pipes, just about to celebrate its 50th anniversary here. It can be programmed ahead to play itself on demand. Concerts featuring the organ are popular.

### **Children and Youth**

The survey came back saying we are very supportive of our programs for children and youth, and we wish we had more kids involved. Sunday school has five teachers who are experienced, excellent, and well-respected. The youth spearheaded projects on Souper Bowl for Caring, a Thanksgiving food drive, and a successful Heifer Project to "buy an ark" for \$5,000. Our youth leader was called "great" in several responses. Choir welcomes our high schoolers, three of whom are regulars. They even provide solos. Youth Sunday involves all of the kids including the teenagers in shows written by one of our talented choir members. The programs are cute and popular. Our youth are also heavily involved in community theatre and high school drama. We are reminded in church to see what the teens are doing locally several times a year. We as a congregation long to have more youth as actively involved in the church as these kids are. Our last pastor had a strength in working with children. She always knew the kids' names, and her children's times gave the children time to talk, often hilariously. She brought in new folks who wanted a place for Christian education for their children. There were about nine children below first grade level. There also became a tradition for the little ones to help ring the giant church bell before the service started. They loved being part of things and were very excited even as they pumped horizontally on the rope which was supposed to be pulled vertically. Suggestions on the survey said we should have more activities to bring in youth and that we should fund youth activities.





### **The Three Strongest Things About This Church**

We've already seen that people rate the social networks and the music as the strongest attraction to the church. They also mentioned the outgoing pastor and the worship. It's important to show that the church isn't just an opportunity to socialize or listen to concerts. It was often mentioned that the building lends an air of spirituality, the atmosphere is conducive to meditation, the prayers bring peace, and spiritual needs are met.



Only one member mentioned our financial backing as a strength, but it is clearly true. We do not have a mortgage on the church, and we have 1.5 million dollars in memorial and endowment funds, with a committee that oversees our investments. Others mentioned the history of the building and the work of the deacons as special strengths, but overall, the consensus was that we are proud of our “community feeling.”

### **Some Things We Agree and Disagree About**

In a survey of our congregation, we asked if the church cares for its members, and although the great majority of responses were yes, a minority of people felt that we are weak on caring for members. One answer was “only if they come to church.” Another said we needed our pastor to reach out more. Another said that the deacons reach out, but no one else does. On the other hand, members say that we have a strong sense of community and some of our best relationships are because of this church. Some say, “I’m here because of the people.” One person said she lost her husband and was “showered with love.”

Another question asked whether it was the pastor or the members who got things done in the church. Many said that the members are strong leaders, especially the deacons. One person pointed out that when the pastor lost her voice early one Sunday morning, every person she asked stepped up to run a part of the service and it was a powerful day. Overall, it would seem that the pastor provided the leadership and the committees got things done.

### **Are Your Spiritual Needs Being Met Here?**

Here the answer is clearly, “Yes.” The number of affirmative responses was very much like the number of people who love the social events of the church. A common response was along the lines of, “I need to be reminded to love.” “I feel fulfilled,” was another answer. “I love the sermons and the prayers,” and “The sermon brings me peace,” were typical comments. Nothing is ever unanimous in a church, so here are some individual comments but not opinions held by many: “Service is too casual sometimes. I want a more solemn prayerful service; I miss the opportunity to discuss the struggles of the Christian life; we need more Bible study; and my spiritual needs are minimal.”

### **Our Beliefs and How They Lead Us to Care for Others**

Westhampton Presbyterian is proud of the fact that the goalposts of our faith acceptance are set wide. We have a conservative group, a liberal group, and a big group in the middle, and we all get along well. As our doctrine says, we accept the essential tenets of the Reformed Church, and we don’t argue the rest. We accept the love and salvation found in Jesus. A simple example is that sexual preference is irrelevant. We are sorry to see the damage that homophobia has done in so many other churches.

As noted in the “spiritual needs” paragraph, we have several people who have almost no spiritual need, right along with some who want stronger Bible-based sermons. “Amen” comes from one quarter and passive listening from another. One person has said that our goalposts are so wide that we don’t believe anything, but that is countered by the many who feel fulfilled and able to face the world again.

*Our faith manifests itself in community service, our faith says that we can make the world a better place.*” A few examples: we serve in hospice, Scouts, the fire department, historical society, Maureen’s Haven for the homeless, community choir, Chamber of Commerce, gay rights, garden club, Rotary, library governance, and Southampton Town leadership. We are also



proud that our pastors were involved in the world around us. Pastors have been on the school board and served as chaplain in the fire department; our last pastor was an EMT and rode the ambulance. Our church is well-known in the community for our members' involvement. *Our faith manifests itself in opening our doors to the community* and making our facility available to groups that are helping our neighbors. Alcoholics Anonymous meets here, for instance, and East End Hospice does its new member training here, as well as a series of bereavement groups for adults and children. The Boy Scouts meet here. We also rent part of our building to a pre-school, a clear opportunity for outreach to the community.

### **Our Boards, Groups, and Mission Activities Within and Outside the Church**

Our Session has a full complement of eleven members. It is not easy to get new volunteers for the Session, and we have discussed combining the Session and Trustees as some churches have done, but we are not ready to do that. The Session will continue to direct the ministry of the congregation in the interim and provide leadership and support when we call and install our next minister. Each member has a responsibility to an aspect of ministry, and each does the work well. The Session is strong and people get along with each other well.

Our twelve Trustees are terrific. They have worked diligently to address problems in a prompt timeframe, made upgrades as needed, and work within the budget provided. We don't hear much about them until we get the report of what is completed, and then we are very impressed. You've already seen examples of their work back on page one under "Our Facilities."

Our twelve Deacons are the most beloved group in the church for their work of touching people's lives. They have a "vineyard" in which each Deacon has a "vine" of families they reach out to with phone calls, cards, and visits. They send out flyers announcing church events, cards for birthdays and life events, and cards for us all to sign for those who might need a special greeting. Deacons also recruit ushers, deliver chancel flowers to the sick or homebound, and host receptions for funerals. We maintain a "Deacon's closet" of medical equipment to lend out to anyone who needs it. Every time the word "Deacon" comes up, people smile. They are everywhere, doing good work.

One strength in our church is that our teens are represented on all of the boards. For example, a young woman who is nearing Eagle rank in scouting serves on Session. Our experience is that these teens will be leaders in their later lives.

Our groups are small, but the work goes on. The Mission Committee of five members gave \$25,825 to twenty-three local, regional, national, and international groups last year plus the Presbytery.

Presbyterian Women have a dozen to fifteen dedicated workers. They organized a community yard sale as a fundraiser last year, and they have an annual Christmas tea and bazaar. They also have luncheons for fellowship monthly and they donate to Child Fund International. As they say, "All women are members."

We've had a men's group start in the last year. Food and fellowship dominate, and the range of discussions is endless. When people say they wish there were more places to just talk about church matters, this is the place to come. Numbers are small but enthusiastic.

Fundraising is a committee dedicated to supporting the church budget in diverse ways. They accomplish this by hosting a variety of events with something to appeal to everyone. Large and small fundraisers, the sale of grocery cards and ornaments and the most successful scrap metal drive added up to over twenty-five thousand dollars toward the budget last year. But that isn't all that the committee does. They also promote fellowship, bringing members and friends together.

Whether it's a summer dinner party under the stars or a Santa Brunch, a ham dinner celebrating the beginning of spring or a Pampered Chef party in a member's kitchen just before Thanksgiving, they bring fellowship along with raising funds to help balance the budget and support the church we all care about. The scrap metal drive, by the way, arose from one person's interest and effort and has grown to be a major contributor. Our leadership often comes from members' ideas carried out with personal effort.

### **Our Staff**

We have just the one minister, who is head of staff. Our full time administrative assistant has been with us since 2015 and is loved for her energy and her computer skills. Our staff music director plays piano and organ on Sundays as well as rehearsing and directing the senior choir. She comes in to play for funerals and weddings as requested. We have a volunteer who has given us a cherub choir from time to time, but that's not a staff position. Our third staff member is a part-time, mostly-Sunday sexton whom we love. He stepped in to help when we lost our full time sexton, and he is so cheerful and competent we wish he were full time. He works hourly at least four hours per week. Our Sunday school and youth programs are headed by a church member who gets high marks every year. We also have paid coverage for several people who oversee our nursery during services.

### **Stewardship**

Our pledge income rose this year, a welcome change after the COVID years and a decline in membership. In 2023, 96 pledge groups promised \$249,072 to the church, as opposed to 95 pledge units and \$226,028 the year before. This was a response to our saying that our increases, such as the insurance bill from \$24,000 to \$34,000, were unsustainable, and we needed help. It was a solid statement that our people support the work of the church.

At the same time, Finance Ministry had a struggle last year as income was weaker and expenses were higher than expected. To meet the budget needs, more income came from the fundraising, building use payments, and extra support from memorial funds. We regularly use 5% of our memorial funds to meet our budget, but recently we had to take more, and that makes us nervous.

### **How Can a New Pastor Help Us?**

We'd like a pastor who would be a presence in the community but still have our church as a primary focus. We recognize that even with our wonderful, active deacons there are folks at home who can't come to church and who get overlooked. Likewise, although we welcome new people to worship, we don't always do well at seeing them become regular visitors or members.

How can we become more active in peace and justice ministries? Likewise, could we find a sister church in Latin or South America to visit and help? Our mission program could be much more relevant if we were personally involved.

We would value a pastor who will help us grow in our volunteering and stirring more members to be active. Some people thought that the 'older folks' were not passing on the 'power' to the younger members, but the nominating committee had trouble finding new people to step up. Perhaps a nudge from a pastor would get new individuals to step up to responsibility. That's how the older folks got started.

We need help in reaching out to people who have drifted away without our noticing. Membership committee can make phone calls, but there is nothing like a reminder from a respected pastor.

We have a significant minority who would like more focus on Bible study. The one study that was done last year right in the village was very popular, but there weren't any more to follow. Perhaps not everyone wishes for this, but it is a weakness for those who do. We should meet that hunger.

What more can we do to help grieving members? We are very good at funeral time, but we may be weak in the longer term. Are there possibilities for grief therapy, or can we try to re-start evening groups like the women's circles for talking and sharing? A number of people said they were sorry that all of our groups met in the daytime, excluding the working people.

We wish for a pastor who will help us with stewardship and regular giving as a spiritual practice.

### **What Characteristics Should a New Pastor Have?**

When the congregation was asked this question, we received 50 different answers. Of course, we know that God has already picked our new pastor, and we can't assemble a shopping list, but we do have opinions. Overall, people wish for a strong preacher, a compassionate person, and one who will see the whole church as an extended family.

Some other wishes that were mentioned:

- \*Good with children
- \*Liberal
- \*community involvement
- \*positive attitude
- \*strong leader
- \*traditional
- \*good storyteller
- \*sense of humor.
- \*strong calling by God
- \*life experience
- \*Bible based
- \*leaves politics out

As a church, we are open to whomever our new pastor turns out to be. We can promise strong acceptance into our church community and years of friendship as we move forward.

### **Other Wishes for the Church**

Fond wishes or opinions that didn't fit into other categories and may be held by only one person are the following:

- \*I hope the church continues on, grows
- \*We should be quiet when entering
- \*More people should take turns ushering
- \*More youth programs
- \*I hope we stay connected between ministers
- \*Have a few tables at coffee time for older folks
- \*I wish there were more time for silent prayers.
- \*Programs for international missions

- \*End at 11 promptly: choir at offering time, shorter sermons on communion days
- \*Traditional hymns and anthems
- \*Minister should visit more
- \*Let's make a community garden in the back field
- \*Improve the electronic equipment.
- \*Bring back Vacation Bible School
- \*Interact with other churches in the area
- \*Bring in guest speakers
- \*Drop box for prayer requests
- \*New kitchen
- \*Fellowship without fundraising
- \*Use the chapel more
- \*Make the service a joy
- \*Home visits for the sick
- \*Avoid politics. Church is a spiritual sanctuary
- \*We need more helpers
- \*We need to find fun ways to facilitate deeper connections
- \*Remember: a rut is a grave with a ramp on each end. Let's move forward.

### **Final Thoughts**

Beyond the survey and the details, this is what we think. We believe that we are a strong church. Thankfully we don't have a mortgage, and we do have investment funds. We love the Lord and each other and enjoy getting together. We love our history and the buildings we have. We love our music and our children. We enjoyed our last minister and were sad to say goodbye. In fact, we have a long history of loving our ministers, and we eagerly look forward to welcoming God's next choice for us.