

STONE CHURCH OF WILLOW GLEN, PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (USA)

# MISSION STUDY REPORT

JUNE 2025

## INTRODUCTION

**E**ighty-one years after its founding in 1944 as a mission project of the Presbytery of San Jose, the Stone Church of Willow Glen, Presbyterian Church (USA), is preparing to search for its eighth head pastor.

The Mission Study Committee of Stone Church of Willow Glen presents this report as a comprehensive study of our congregation's history, current identity, and future direction in relation to the world we inhabit. We conducted 11 extensive listening sessions with our congregation, a detailed online congregational survey, and interviews with church and community leaders to assess the needs of our church and neighborhood and to identify the qualities required in our next pastoral leader. Full reports on all these activities are in the **Appendices, Page 43.**

This Mission Study Report is the first in at least two decades to be written following such a comprehensive effort. We intend it to be a resource and guide for Stone Church's future and for our future Pastor Nominating Committee by:

- Uniting our congregation around a common vision of who we are and aspire to be,
- Inspiring our Session's leadership through a fuller understanding of the spiritual, human, physical and financial resources of Stone Church,
- Informing candidates for our pastoral position about who we are through the story of our journey and how that has led us to the path we see ahead.

We did this because, in our Presbyterian tradition, we are and intend to be open to God's new revelations of Christian service and purpose in an eternally evolving world. We want to do it through clear eyes, listening ears and loving hearts. Being alive and relevant in that world means we, too, must evolve. And it means that in a few years — certainly less than two more decades — it will be time to re-study and rethink where Stone Church is in the light of new realities and challenges of that time, and to adjust accordingly.

Reformed, always reforming.

## MISSION STUDY COMMITTEE

Fred Oliver, chair, Joanne Vliet, vice chair, Maureen Chandler, Jeremy Easton, Deborah Crim, Marta Espinal, Barbara Krause, and Jody Meacham

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## OUR STONES

*Stonemason Manel Sunyer built this chancel wall in 1954 and sang in our choir each Sunday*

### MISSION STATEMENT

Stone Church exists to be a welcoming and inclusive community that nurtures faith, fosters deep relationships, and serves others with justice and compassion. We strive to be a beacon of love and hope, engaging our neighborhood, advocating for the marginalized, and creating a spiritual home where everyone can grow and belong.

### VISION STATEMENT

Stone Church aspires to be a welcoming and inclusive community that nurtures faith, fosters deep relationships, and serves others with justice and compassion.

### CORE VALUES

1. **AUTHENTIC COMMUNITY & SPIRITUAL GROWTH**  
A value for meaningful relationships, honest connection, and thoughtful faith exploration across generations, rooted in both tradition and openness to the Spirit.
2. **DEEP-SEATED WELCOME & INCLUSION**  
A deep commitment to creating a church where everyone — across age, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and background — is not only accepted but truly belongs.
3. **FAITH IN ACTION FOR JUSTICE**  
A belief that following Jesus means engaging the world with compassion and courage, advocating for equity, and serving those in need.

## ORIGINAL CHURCH

*Our chapel, completed in 1947,  
now contains classrooms*



## REPORT SUMMARY

### MAIN POINTS

- Stone Church was established during the birth and initial growth of one of San Jose's first post-World War II neighborhoods.
- Over seven decades, the church grew older while our neighborhood remained young and grew more racially diverse.
- An aging congregation is common at many churches, but several factors hid its effects at Stone.
- The five-year period of pastoral changes and Covid pandemic were an extremely stressful time for our congregation.
- The three-year gap since our last permanent pastor has tested us, but the response of members to our study has been an encouraging experience.
- Our committee has concluded that reconnecting with our neighbors and their families would reinvigorate our congregation.
- A list of the principles guiding this report's recommendations.

Stone Church of Willow Glen is a beloved, justice-minded congregation at a crossroads. Our legacy is strong, our gifts are real, and our people are ready to re-engage. We are being called to become a neighborhood sanctuary, a progressive Christian witness, and a place where all generations are invited to belong, grow, and serve. This Mission Study marks a new chapter — not one of nostalgia or decline — but of resurrection. We go forward with faith, humility, and hope.

We are a long-established Presbyterian congregation in one of San Jose's first post-war residential neighborhoods, Willow Glen. However, though the histories of church and neighborhood are interlinked, they have not evolved in parallel.

Unlike in 1947, the year Stone Church was established, today nearly seven in 10 of our members are 65 or older compared to two in 10 in that age group in the 95125 Zip Code, roughly contiguous with Willow Glen. As a result of our aging and women's longer lifespans, two-thirds of us are female compared to an almost 50-50 split in the neighborhood. And 94% of us are white, while 40% of Willow Glen residents are not.

It's been at least 20 years since we have engaged in an intensive examination of ourselves and our community in a mission study process like this one. Nevertheless, we've intuitively recognized symptoms of our disconnect. While the church and its neighborhood developed contemporaneously, the church was slow to perceive or adapt to changes in the surrounding community. In an extensive, confidential survey of our congregation, the vast majority (61%) said the topic they most wanted to sit down and discuss was "challenges of an aging congregation and decline in younger members."

*The one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.*

Philippians 1:6 (NRSVUE)

Our success as a theologically progressive, stylistically traditional church, in keeping a relatively stable membership helped hide what was happening. We continued to absorb members from other churches struggling with challenges like ours. The most notable example was the closure of 170-year-old First Presbyterian Church of San Jose in 2019.

The last five years, however, have been a difficult period, causing us to pause and reassess ourselves, our community and our mission through this study and report. Since calling our most recent pastor/head of staff in 2018, we dealt with that pastor's resignation after a four-year tenure, the subsequent Pastor Nominating Committee (PNC) not finding a successor whose terms were acceptable to the Session, followed by the resignation of our associate pastor of 10 years. Such a chain of events would stress any congregation, but this occurred during and immediately following the Covid pandemic, which prevented us from meeting together for a year. Taken together, these events compounded the dissociation many felt from one another, their church, its mission and future.

The Mission Study Committee's congregational survey in 2024 documented the impact of this series of events on our members. Nearly six in 10 respondents disagreed that Stone periodically undertook studies to guide church planning. Majorities of respondents "disagreed" or "strongly disagreed" that church morale is high, that disagreements are dealt with openly, that church activities are well publicized in the community, or that there is a sense of excitement among members. The complete results of the 71-question survey are in **Appendix E, Page 79**.

One listening session participant spoke directly to the loss of younger members at Stone — common at many churches — and the fear expressed across all eight adult meetings that the solutions necessary might destroy traditions and practices they hold dear. "A church that wants to grow will probably look very different than it does now. It may not look like the Stone Church I belong to. I have no idea what the younger generation wants, but that's who we need to draw. My son has no desire to be here whatsoever." All listening session comments are listed in **Appendix B, Page 46**.

The now three-year period since our last permanent pastor has tested our members' resilience. But their patience and willingness to participate in this committee's work is strong evidence of the congregation's commitment to Stone Church and optimism about the church's future.

The small-group listening sessions we conducted in early 2025 as a follow-up to our survey revealed a commitment to renewal. One member wrote in the congregational survey that "We are bound together in love and faith." Another wrote: "There are many congregation members who are extremely committed to — and in fact truly love — Stone Church."

New forms of ministry necessarily will require letting go of familiar patterns, investing new energy, and possibly rethinking how worship, leadership, and community life are structured. This is frightening as well as promising. But the courage to move forward in faith despite uncertainty has been a defining mark of this congregation's progressive history.

Consequently, our committee has concluded that the future of Stone Church lies within us and our willingness to once again serve the neighborhood of 54,000 residents where more than half our members live, and then beyond Willow Glen. The principles guiding the recommendations we make in this report (**Going forward: Our strategic recommendations, Page 31**) are intended to implement this strategy around these goals:

- Clearly communicating our mission and vision among ourselves and the broader community,
- Reorganizing our structure to adequately meet our operational, spiritual, congregational and mission needs without overworking our volunteers, and
- Working to increase resources including through partnerships with other entities where current resources are inadequate.