

Sharing the Vision

A Vision Worth Sharing

The vision of Cedar Ridge is to be a community that is dedicated to seeking the kingdom of God; that dreams of—and works towards—heaven on earth; and that partners with Christ, and with others, to make the world a better place.

Our vision portrays a community that is a place of safety and healing, of hope and transformation for people of all ages, ethnicities and backgrounds. Through our vision we declare our intention to accept, respect and lovingly journey alongside everyone who enters our community. If we are making progress towards our vision, and living out the call to follow Jesus, we should be growing numerically.

We want others to experience the liberating good news that underlies Cedar Ridge's vision and values—and we cannot wait to be a perfect community before inviting others to join us. We do not want to “compete” with neighboring churches, but we do want to offer an alternative way of following Jesus to non-churched people, and to those who no longer feel aligned with the vision of their current faith community.

Cedar Ridge is a small but distinctive part of the body of Christ in the world. While there is a lot of talk in the emergent church movement and among “progressive” Christians about the need for new ways of following Jesus, there are few churches offering practical models for achieving this. We can play a valuable role in sharing ideas and participating in the conversation with other churches working towards visions similar to our own, as well as learning from such churches and leveraging their own experience and networks.

The implications of our vision include the following:

- We seek to make a positive contribution to and learn from the church at large
- We join with local partners in making the world a better place
- We intentionally attract people to join our community
- We proactively engage people where they are
- We mobilize members as “ambassadors” and partners in Christ's work of reconciling all things

Current Reality

Contribute to and learn from the church at large

This has not been an area of focus for us in recent years. We have prioritized gaining traction with our vision, and have been wary of making claims that do not match up to reality. This prioritization has resulted in small and imperfect—and yet significant and sharable—models for engagement in economic justice, racial reconciliation, environmental stewardship, global partnerships, and other issues. We have not actively participated in Christian or multi-faith conferences or events to share these models or learn from what other communities are doing. In some (limited) circles, Cedar Ridge is still known as Brian McLaren's former church, which gives our community a certain level of additional external credibility that could be drawn upon to strengthen our ability to share our learning with others.

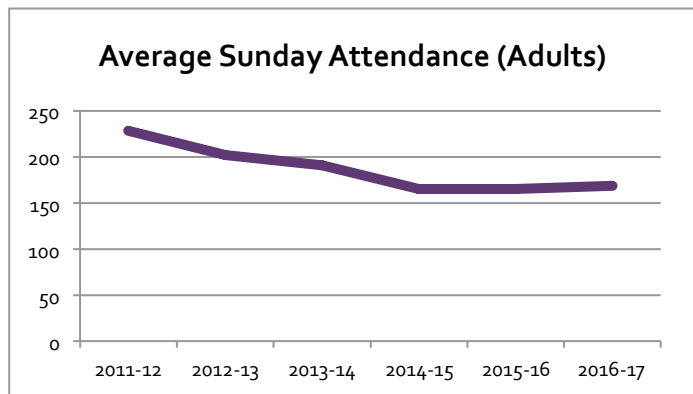
Join with local partners

We have been quietly and consistently serving in our local neighborhood through farm produce deliveries, days of service, support to Greencastle Elementary School, and the like—all of which are in support of other local care-giving institutions. We have also organized a range of educational events related to racial reconciliation and economic justice; as well as more contemplative, prayer- and creativity-focused activities. With the exception of support to Greencastle—which is still in the formative stage—these various initiatives have not intentionally sought to collaborate with faith-based or other vision-aligned partners.

Attract people to join our community

Roadside signage, intermittent direct mailing and involvement in Burtonsville Day has increased our name-recognition in the neighborhood, and events such as the Harvest Festival, Christmas play, and farm workdays have brought people onto the property. Improvements to the commons and auditorium have contributed to a welcoming atmosphere, and attention has been paid to making Sunday services accessible to non-churched people. However, such initiatives have not resulted in numerical growth.

Ten years ago, Sunday morning attendance at Cedar Ridge peaked around 500 adults. In the following eight years, attendance fell precipitously, but has more recently leveled off. There are several likely reasons for the drop in attendance:



- *Lack of alignment with vision*—Some people have left because the vision is not a fit for where they are on their spiritual journey. This was a significant issue initially, and is probably a reason why some newcomers decide not to commit to Cedar Ridge.
- *Shift away from weekly attendance*—Many people who consider themselves committed to Cedar Ridge do not attend every week, or even every other week. This seems to be a cultural phenomenon experienced by many churches.¹
- *Lack of sustained commitment*—Cedar Ridge is based in a part of the country where people are highly mobile. Many people expect transience as a way of life—leaving jobs and churches every few years in an effort to further their careers or their family’s wellbeing, or in response to conflict.
- *Members do not invite friends and family*—Cedar Ridge does not have a strong culture of inviting others to services. This probably reflects a multitude of factors including (i) a lack of enthusiasm for and/or confidence in the Cedar Ridge understanding of the gospel (good news); (ii) a lack of confidence in the quality of the Sunday morning experience; (iii) a reticence to appear “pushy”

¹ The average churchgoer attends only 1.7 times a month, according to Derek Gillette in “Goodbye Generosity,” January 2015.

or “religious”; (iv) a lack of meaningful friendships with non-churchgoers; and (v) the inconvenience of Cedar Ridge’s location.

- *Newcomers do not stay*—There are many reasons why newcomers decide not to make their home at Cedar Ridge, some of them appropriate (e.g., lack of alignment with our vision), and others less so. One tension that exists is our desire to give people space and not be pushy, with the need for people to feel welcome and be able to quickly integrate into our community.
- *We are not easy to find*—Over the last 10 years, we have resisted self-promotion, but this has had the unintended consequence of making us hard to find by people looking for a church community with our values and vision.

Engage people where they are

Currently, we practice servanthood in the broader community, but expect spiritual growth to happen in the context of Sunday services at the church building, or in home-based groups during the week. We do not sponsor or support other regular off-site growth opportunities. Small groups do not generally invite non-church attenders to join them—although some groups continue to attract former Cedar Ridge members, and many include family members for social events. The Sunday morning book study attracts a few non-church attenders on a regular basis, but is not well attended. A group of Cedar Ridge students met at the University of Maryland for a couple of years, but the group is no longer active.

Mobilize members as ambassadors

Our vision implies an organic process of people being attracted to and welcomed into the Cedar Ridge community. Although our mission statement refers to “making disciples,” many Cedar Ridge members have first-hand experience of toxic approaches to sharing the good news of Jesus that were principally about being right and imposing dogma, rather than embodying a way of love. There is a general reticence to appearing “pushy” or “religious” by talking about Jesus or inviting others to join our community, and members are rarely encouraged to share their faith story with others.

Priorities for Moving Forward

Possible initiatives for moving forward are listed below, using the five implications of our vision as a framework.

Contribute to and learn from the church at large

Sharing models, practices, learning and ideas with other churches, leaders and networks may have a limited direct impact in terms of numerical growth. However, there is potential for raising our profile and for learning from others about innovative strategies for attracting newcomers, including youth. In addition, it is part of our call to humbly serve the body of Christ. The list of potential networking and influencing opportunities is endless, and could quickly absorb a lot of our resources. Therefore we need to be very intentional and thoughtful about whom we seek to support, influence or learn from, and in which activities we engage. Initiatives could include the following:

- *Networking*—Form relationships through networking via our established connections (e.g., Brian McLaren, OPEN, meet ups) to directly share what we have learned and developed, and to learn from others.

- *Conferences*—Identify select conferences, workshops or other events that seem appropriate forums at which to exchange learning.
- *Resources*—In the longer term, package resources identified as in demand (e.g., discipleship materials, lessons learned documents, children and youth lessons plans) for external dissemination.
- *Supporting other leaders*—Identify any likeminded leaders of Spanish-speaking churches to support as part of our outreach efforts to Greencastle and to Ipaltecos.
- *Media*—Develop media links to position Cedar Ridge to give an opinion on issues, since we have an approach that is distinctive from many other churches and resonates with many people.

Join with local partners

Initiatives in this category enable us to create synergy with others as we work to make the world a better place. This instills humility (we are not the sole solution to the world’s problems!), strengthens relationships with others, and increases the efficacy of our activities and the breadth of our outreach. Again, these activities may have limited direct impact on regular Cedar Ridge attendance, but will make us more visible in the community, and are aligned with our vision. Activities could include:

- *Joint services*—Conduct ecumenical or multi-faith services, such as a Thanksgiving service; and join with other faith communities in their multi-faith services.
- *Joint events*—Come together with other secular and faith-based organizations for events such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day.
- *Service projects*—Proactively invite other organizations and faith communities to collaborate on the farm, our work in Guatemala, days of service, and local economic justice activities.
- *Joint advocacy*—Work with local partners, such as Action in Montgomery, to organize and support letter-writing, rallying and other forms of advocacy on behalf of racial reconciliation and economic justice issues.

Attract people to join our community

In recent years, we have thought about this aspect of numerical growth in terms of “finding the people who want to find us.” Possible initiatives in this area fall into a number of different categories, as described below.

- **Greater investment in marketing and outreach**—We want to share who we are in compelling ways. This may include:
 - More online marketing through church locator websites, Google ads, Facebook boosts, search engine optimization, use of social media, radio, and online calendars of events (Washington Post, WGTS, etc.)
 - More strategic direct mail for regular services and/or events, and to people who move into the area (through the post office’s change of address listings)
 - More public space advertising of events, such as in coffee shops and grocery stores
 - Advertise other events such as quiet days, racial reconciliation events, etc.
 - Establish a meetup.com group to promote events and partner with others
 - Ensure people coming onto the property (for the farm, Harvest Festival, etc.) receive information about upcoming events
 - Make the website more engaging with a promotional video

- Invest time in gaining media exposure through stories about our social justice initiatives, service projects, farm and Guatemala
- Sponsor time slots on radio to increase name recognition
- Include explicit descriptions of our values and unique characteristics in flyers, mailings and online
- Develop a pastors' blog
- Register our labyrinth with The Labyrinth Society
- Make the roadside signage more engaging and distinctive/unique
- **Better connection with newcomers**—We want to ensure newcomers of all ages and backgrounds feel welcome and can easily integrate into the life of the community. This may include:
 - Create a pathway from events to Cedar Ridge membership through easy/relevant follow-on events and activities. Examples include
 - Initiating something in the Christmas and Easter services that draws people back
 - Leveraging events such as the Harvest Festival or farm sangria nights with a next step
 - For God in the Movies, screen the movie the night before on the side of the Barn and invite people to the movie and the message the next day
 - Screen more documentaries (as a transition point between fun events and Sunday services)
 - Provide next steps and information for SSL volunteers
 - Create "friends days" or Sunday services that are particularly newcomer-friendly (for children and youth, as well as for adults), with messages based on topics of general interest, celebrations of community, or annual traditions
 - Develop well-designed flyers to use as invitations to newcomer-friendly services
 - Create more of a welcoming culture (greeting should be everyone's job), including:
 - Committing to talk to people we don't know for the first few minutes after the service
 - Not sitting in the same seat each week
 - Being intentional about greeting others and introducing ourselves
 - Greeting newcomers at CR7M
 - Organize monthly "Pizza with the Pastor" for newcomers and others to engage in Q&A
 - Leverage our Brian McLaren history through literature that references our history, or a library which includes Brian's books
- **Outreach through events**—We want to make our events easy for non-churched people to partner with us. This may include:
 - Increase outreach efforts related to the farm and service days, emphasizing our desire for the "common good"
 - Leverage holidays, cultural events, and specific seasons to invite visitors to join us
 - Hold outdoor church with a picnic on Saturday afternoons
 - Open up children and youth events to friends and neighbors

- **Open up our property**—We want to share our property with our neighbors in welcoming and responsible ways. This topic will be considered in more detail in the property paper.

Engage people where they are

It is not enough to only “find the people who want to find us.” Many people need a community like Cedar Ridge, even if they do not yet recognize that need. We therefore need to move beyond making our services and property welcoming to newcomers, and deliberately and thoughtfully engage people where they are. This may include the following:

- *Service partners*—Be more proactive in sharing our name and story personally and through flyers with and through our farm produce recipient partners, service day project sites, economic justice partners, etc. Follow service partners on Twitter and tweet about our interactions with them.
- *Interest groups*—Host documentary screenings or hold discussion groups in neighborhoods and work places, or at partner sites such as Greencastle Elementary School or Langley Park. Topics could include social justice or environmental issues, general interest themes such as finding hope, or a more overtly God-related series (similar to the *Alpha* course).
- *Life stages*—Hold workshops on specific life stages or needs, such as caring for aging parents, empty-nesters, parenting, grieving, etc.
- *Satellite events*—Have discipleship groups host a local event, where there is an hour-long presentation (a synthesis of a recent message series repackaged for a non-churched audience) followed by discussion
- *Constituency hours*—Hold regular “constituency hours” at a Starbucks or pub for people to stop by and talk with pastors or other leaders
- *Group meet-ups*—Have groups of Cedar Ridge members meet to discuss a topic in a coffee shop or restaurant, and invite friends
- *Community events*—Engage in more community events such as local agricultural fairs, and events at the Sandy Spring Museum

Mobilize members as ambassadors

Evidence from other churches suggests that only a minority of the newcomers who become members will be attracted through impersonal mass marketing. New members are more typically invited by neighbors and friends. We therefore need to strengthen member capacity and willingness to share and embody Cedar Ridge’s understanding of the gospel with others. Initiatives could include the following:

- *What is the gospel?*—Conduct a message series on the gospel that is both philosophical and practical (what is the good news, how do we live it out, and how and why do we talk to others about it).
- *Articulating our story*—Strengthen member ability to “package” the gospel in a personal and authentic way through exercises that help people think through their story and their understanding of Jesus’ story, and practice sharing it with someone else.
- *Communicating about Cedar Ridge*—Help people to think through “What Cedar Ridge means to me” and encourage more people to volunteer for Cedar Ridge in 7 Minutes as a good way to develop an elevator pitch.
- *Skill development*—Develop listening, connecting, compassion and empathy skills through teaching, exercises and practices.

- *Prioritizing church engagement*—Conduct a message series that inspires people with a renewed concept of what the church is and can be, and supports them in saying no to cultural expectations around use of time, including ever-longer work hours, and the prioritizing of children’s extra-curricula activities. This may include an exercise for individuals to think through how Cedar Ridge has benefitted them personally.
- *Resource list*—Develop a list of book or podcast recommendations for non-churched friends or family members who are interested in exploring our distinctive way of following Jesus (possibly integrated into the CRCC phone app).

Next Steps

While the list of potential activities is long, there are some overarching themes that encompass many of these suggestions:

- *Enhance our use of online technology*—videos, website listings, and use of social media are all relatively quick and easy ways to strengthen outreach
- *Be more proactive in messaging our identity*—ensure that online and written communications, videos, signage and media engagement features our values and distinctive characteristics, as expressed in our vision
- *Make sharing the vision personal*—help people to articulate why Cedar Ridge matters to them, and why they should share their story
- *Create pathways to engagement*—consciously create easy steps from one-off fun events to more meaningful and lasting engagement with our community
- *Take Cedar Ridge “on the road”*—repackage existing content and deliver it locally as a way to meet people where they are and begin a pathway to engagement