

**Highlands United
Presbyterian
Church**

2390 Pattison Ave., Cheyenne, WY

Mission Study Report

Spring 2024



Submitted to the Wyoming Presbytery ~ Committee on Ministry



Highlands is an inclusive faith community that gathers, shares, and acts on the ideals of Jesus's teachings.

Our congregation takes the Bible seriously, but not literally. We are committed to mission and advocacy for "the least of these, our brothers and sisters."

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Silvie "The Church Dog" watches as her Dad, Howard Zabel, assists with Communion



Introduction

In late September 2023, after serving the Highlands congregation since 2008, Reverend Rodger McDaniel retired as its Pastor. Reverend McDaniel oversaw a significant period of growth for Highlands, providing vision, leadership, and encouragement as the church moved from a struggling faith community to an influential force for social justice in the community of Cheyenne, in the Front Range region, and throughout the State of Wyoming.

Our faith community began preparations to call a new pastor in fall 2023. Numerous activities (detailed later in this document) have been undertaken with the intent to reach our members and others who worship at Highlands, giving all who wish a stake in shaping our future.

Highlands Presbyterian is currently in a strong financial position with funds saved to support hiring a new pastor. The importance of planning for this eventuality was identified through strategic planning, completed in 2017 and updated in 2022. In 2017, Highland's Future Fund was determined to be a priority. Today, the fund has reached its goal of \$ 150,000.00 and will continue to grow, with the intent of providing support for new leadership to "spread their wings" in our community.

Special thanks is due to Rev. Bob Garrard who has been our guiding light throughout this process. Activities have been directed by Highlands Ruling Elders and supported by the many retired clergy (from denominations as diverse as Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, as well as Presbyterian) who worship with us every Sunday. Thanks to all involved.



Mission, Vision, and Values

We dedicate ourselves to fearlessly following the Vision, Mission, and Values we have set forth for Highlands United Presbyterian Church.

VISION STATEMENT

Highlands is an inclusive faith community that gathers, shares, and acts on the ideals of Jesus's teachings.

MISSION STATEMENT

Highlands is a faith community where God's love is manifest by lifting up individuals and our local, national, and global communities through inclusive fellowship, progressive Christian study and worship, and service to our neighbors in need.

Faithful to the words of the hymn, "We will work with each other, we will work side by side; and we'll guard each one's dignity and save each one's pride and they will know we are Christians by our love." (*They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love*, written by Peter Raymond Scholtes, 1938-2009)

OUR CORE VALUES

- ◆ **We value diversity** and accepting God's children without judgment. We welcome all persons regardless of race, sexual orientation or identity, immigration status, or other characteristics that may define cultural differences.
- ◆ **We value diversity of faiths.** We recognize and honor our commonalities and believe an interfaith dialogue is critical to bringing about a just and compassionate world.
- ◆ **We value fellowship and building relationships.** We seek to be strengthened through authentic, trusting friendships among the people within our faith community.
- ◆ **We value generosity.** We share our spiritual gifts and resources with the church and our community.
- ◆ **We value God's creation.** We strive to be good stewards of the environment and advocates for a livable and sustainable world.
- ◆ **We value social justice.** We serve and advocate for the least of these our brothers and sisters.
- ◆ **We value spiritual wellbeing.** We worship to feel God's presence in our lives and strengthen our community.
- ◆ **We value thoughtful, honest, and discerning study of the Christian faith.**

A Brief History of Highlands

Special thanks to Highlands member and historian Victor J. Lisek for his efforts documenting the history of Highlands United Presbyterian Church. This summary was made possible by his detailed work, which can be found on the Highlands website (<https://www.highlandsofcheyenne.com/our-future>)

The Beginning: 1964 to 1969

In the early 1960's, discussion began regarding the need for a second Presbyterian Church in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The First Presbyterian Church, located in downtown Cheyenne, was founded in 1869. The need for a church to serve the growing northeast Cheyenne neighborhoods of Buffalo Ridge, Indian Hills, and Sun Valley was identified by the Presbyterian Board of National Mission, the Cheyenne Council of Churches, and by residents of the involved subdivisions.

In 1963, with leadership and support from First Presbyterian Church, plans were made to build the church in the Buffalo Ridge neighborhood. A large 5+ acre plot of land was purchased, for the sum of \$ 8,000.00. As church historian Vic Lisek notes, "the location on a hill in the high plains and the relationship to the Presbyterian Church with Scotland suggested the obvious name, Highlands". In 1965, Highlands celebrated its founding (June 6th) and Reverend Emery Roy was installed as the first pastor of Highlands on September 26th.

In 1966, an architect was selected (John Freed) to design the church and building commenced. Mr. Robert L. Buenger was hired to construct the building for \$ 83,550.00. The ground breaking ceremony was held on January 8, 1967 and building continued into the summer. Highlands United Presbyterian Church first opened its doors on July 23, 1967 and was dedicated in September with over 140 members.

During this period, the new church established a choir, purchased a piano and organ (thanks to the social group "Highlands Clipper Ship of Mariners"), and held numerous potlucks and community events. Highland's newsletter "The Clan" was also founded, providing information about events and church business to an ever-growing congregation.

Although the late 1960's brought some challenging times to the new faith community, member roles would continue to grow, reaching 171 (1968) and 182 at the end of 1969. Highlands finished this period in financial solvency.

Through the Years: 1970 to 1999

Over the next thirty years, Highlands held services in the new church, continued to provide fellowship for its congregation by way of services, musical events, activities for youth, children, and the community. Vic Lisek reports that during these early days, Highlands began support for community groups including Comea Shelter, Habitat for Humanity, Needs, Inc., and other local organizations. The Mariners continued to be active throughout the 70's and 80's.

Early in 1970, Rev. Roy left Highlands for another position out of state, and over the next three decades, a succession of ministers served the Highlands community, both as interim and called pastors. In 1975, active membership was 101; in 1977 it declined to 91; rising again in 1979 to 118.

In 1982, Highlands provided support for the creation of a Korean congregation in Cheyenne. Korean services were held weekly at Highlands starting in April and integrating these new families into Highlands attendance, membership rose to 134 individuals. Worship would continue at Highlands until 1990 when the Korean congregation requested separation from Highlands, moving to their new church on Myers Court.

In 1989, Dr. James Clark was invited to speak at Highlands and to be considered for the position of pastor. He was subsequently hired as pastor in early 1989 and under his guidance, Highlands slowly regained strength as a faith community. Dr. Clark's tenure would continue until 1993; proving to be a period of stability and growth for Highlands with membership rolls increasing to 120 individuals. Sunday worship attendance averaged 60 people. Rev. Clark would remain with Highlands until 1993 when he announced his retirement.

The next years proved to be a challenging time for Highlands. Ministers came and left, church elders resigned, attendance declined and funding was subsequently reduced. In 1994, active membership declined to 72 and weekly attendance hovered around 36 people. In 1995, Rev. Curtis Barnett was hired as interim pastor and during his tenure, Highlands' situation began to improve. A new pastor, Rev. Linda Norris, was installed as pastor in August of 1997. She would lead Highlands into the new millennium as "a sound, active and responsive, even though smaller" church (V. Lisek, 2023) with strong leadership and a bright future.

The New Millennium: 2000 to present

Reverend Norris remained with Highlands until November 2003, at which time she resigned for health reasons. After her departure, Highlands once again faced challenges. A number of improvements were made to the facility during these years and these expenses, coupled with declining attendance and revenue, meant that money was withdrawn from Highland's contingency fund to cover the bills. In 2007, Highlands had only 40 active members.

The year 2008 found Highlands with no installed pastor, elders addressing many of the regular duties, and a succession of guests in the pulpit on Sundays. One of these guest pastors was Reverend Rodger McDaniel, who periodically contributed sermons for the congregation. Rev. McDaniel agreed to a six-month contract, delivering three sermons each month. Vic Lisek reports that at that time, attendance was at a low of about 25 individuals each Sunday.

The McDaniel Years: After practicing law for twenty years, Reverend McDaniel received his Master of Divinity degree in 1999 from the Iliff School of Theology in Denver and was ordained in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In 2009, Rev. McDaniel contracted with Highlands to be their part-time pastor, providing three sermons each month and in July, retired Lutheran Minister Rev. Duane Ferchen was hired to lead Highland's worship on the fourth Sunday each month. These two hires would prove transformational to the little church on the hill.

As written by Mr. Lisek "The year 2011 might be considered pivotal regarding the focus, direction, and disposition at Highlands. A more contemporary approach to the interpretation of scripture, more active social justice involvement, and some adaptation to the worship service were all gradually introduced". Some members thrived in this new environment while others languished. Membership initially declined but quickly regained ground as enthusiasm for the church grew.

New mission activities were added including work with Recover Wyoming, Family Promise, and Wyoming Family Home Ownership. A community garden was started. Bibles and Beer, a scripture



Highlands Service March 2019 with guests Dr. Jason Bloomberg and Imam Mohamed Salih

discussion group open to the community and welcoming all faiths and types of spirituality (including atheists and agnostics) began at a local restaurant. Highlands welcomed Mohammed Salih, a Muslim Imam, as a guest participant in a Sunday worship service. Bridges were built between Cheyenne's local Synagogue, Mt. Sinai, and Highlands. At the end of 2012, membership had risen to 40 individuals.

In early 2013, a major renovation for the church took place, funded by the sale of a portion of the land owned by the church. The city intended to build a community park in the Buffalo Ridge neighborhood and Highlands was in the perfect location. The sale took place in late 2013 for \$ 400,000. Work commenced to "reverse the sanctuary entrance so that a rose window, altar table, and pulpit were positioned at the east end to receive the rising sunlight during worship services" (V. Lisek, 2023).

In November of 2013, Highland's congregation proceeded through a discernment process regarding future designation as a "More Light" Presbyterian Church. With a majority of members in agreement, Session voted to move forward with the designation and in so doing became an advocate for the full participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) people in the life, ministry, and witness of the Presbyterian Church (USA) and in society. In 2013, Highlands was Wyoming's only More Light Presbyterian Church.

Over the next decade, Highlands became known throughout the Front Range as a leader in social justice activities. Below are listed some highlights during this period. More details may be found by reading the full history of the church on the Highlands website (<https://www.highlandsofcheyenne.com/our-future>).

- ◆ In 2015, Rev. Bob and Holly Garrard educated the congregation about the Middle East, and conditions for the Presbyterians in Lebanon and Syria.
- ◆ In January of 2016, Highlands opened its doors to the community celebrating the life and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with the Honorable Judge Ronn Jeffrey participating.
- ◆ Highlands joined the Unitarian Universalist Church of Cheyenne in protest of immigration deportation policies during the Trump era (2017) by participating in a "sanctuary covenant". Together, the two churches hosted an undocumented immigrant, providing shelter, meals, and financial support to his family.

- ◆ In 2017, Highlands applied for and was designated an “EarthCare” congregation; the only such designation in Wyoming today.
- ◆ In 2019, Highlands was designated as a Hunger Action Congregation and recertified in 2022. This work was driven largely by member Naomi Baresel, fondly remembered as a “force of nature” at Highlands. We remain the only designee in Wyoming.
- ◆ In 2019, Highlands also became a Matthew 25 Church and remains the only designee in Wyoming. During that year, activities with the Wind River Indian Reservation increased, continuing to present.

In early 2020, the first evidence of COVID-19 in the United States was identified, with impacts on schools, faith communities, places of work, and daily living for us all. Like many progressive faith communities, Highlands suspended in-person worship beginning in March of 2020, relying on the Zoom platform to reach the congregation. This continued for more than a year, with the first in-person worship service held on Easter Sunday 2021; after most congregational members had received their initial COVID-19 vaccination.

While many churches struggled through this period, Highlands leveraged Zoom to reach local and non-local members. Even after worship services were deemed safe to hold in person, Highlands continued to use the Zoom platform, providing blended Sunday services averaging 80 individuals including the Wyoming communities of Evanston, Lander, Riverton, Rock Springs and Sheridan; and congregational members in other states including Arizona, Colorado, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington.

Today, members hold meetings using Zoom, reaching participants throughout the state and across the nation. New members have joined Highlands who have never stepped into our building and through their financial support, the church has been able to expand many of our projects. Zoom also opened doors for us, enabling Highlands to host guest speakers from across the nation. This reality has certainly eased concerns during the current period between pastoral leaders.

As a Matthew 25 church, Highlands also reached out to support “the least of these” in the early 2020’s. Three projects are of note: Support to indigenous students at Central Wyoming College (CWC); support for Afghan Refugees relocating to Colorado; and the establishment of a voluntary “land-tax” to support projects on the

Wind River Reservation. More detail about these project may be found under Church Ministries and Activities.

- ◆ In May 2021, a permanent endowment fund (Highlands United Presbyterian Church Emergency Fund; \$ 29,000) was established at CWC, located in Riverton (WY) near the Wind River Indian Reservation. Its purpose was to support Native American students who may experience a financial crisis during their time at the college.
- ◆ As the United States completed the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan in 2021, many Afghan citizens were given sanctuary in major cities throughout the nation. Denver Colorado saw in influx of families that overwhelmed their service capacity. While Wyoming did not accept refugees, Highlands wanted to support the effort and to that end, worked closely with the Afghan Islamic Center in Northglenn, Colorado.
- ◆ After a comprehensive discernment process (fall 2022), the congregation decided that Highlands should adopt a land-tax as a way to provide reparation to Indigenous Peoples in Wyoming.

In June of 2023, Rev. Rodger McDaniel announced his retirement. His last service with the church was Sunday, September 24th. The congregation thanked Rodger for more than 14 years of exceptional service to Highlands United Presbyterian Church and to our community.

Rev. Bob Garrard graciously agreed to serve as Guest Pastor during our search for new leadership.

“Highlands must continue to be the voice for progressive Christianity because it demonstrates people of faith can serve ‘the least of these’ by reclaiming the Gospels and the words of the ancient prophets from the literal misunderstandings of our times.”

- Rev. Rodger McDaniel



Rev. Bob Garrard and Ivan Williams, Mission Chair, with donated household items for Afghan Refugee families in northern Colorado

The Community of Cheyenne Wyoming

The city of Cheyenne was established in August of 1867 with a population of 600 people. The city was located in the Dakota Territory and is named for a tribe belonging to the Alogonquian, originally called “Shey’ an’ nah”. Cheyenne has always been a railroad town; one of the primary stops as migration continued throughout the West. As such, the community grew quickly in population and became known as the “Magic City of the Plains”.

In Cheyenne and throughout the West, as settlers populated the prairie, native peoples were displaced. In recognition of this injustice, Highlands proudly displays a statement at the entrance of the building, recognizing the indigenous peoples of this region. More about this is included later in the document.

Today: Cheyenne is the capital of Wyoming (since 1869), and the largest city in the state. Economic activities include transportation, livestock interests, health care, tourism, and governmental activities. Laramie County Community College brings academic engagement to our community with the University of Wyoming just 50 miles to the west in Laramie (WY).

Restaurants, concerts and festivals abound in our downtown area from late spring into fall. Cheyenne is also home to Frontier Days, the world’s largest outdoor rodeo.

Laramie County is also the home of F.E. Warren Air Force Base¹, and the home of the 90th Missile Wing as well as the 20th Air Force. F.E. Warren employs an estimated 3,000 military members and 1,000 civilians. Families in the area add about 5,500 persons to the county population.

Many of these individuals stay in the county after retirement. During the period of 2018-2022, the U.S. Census Bureau² estimated a total of 7,326 veterans in Cheyenne, with another 3,000 estimated in the county.

Perhaps one of the most appreciated benefits of living in Laramie County is the short travel time to work. Mean travel time for county residents³ is 17.2 minutes as

¹ Source: F.E. Warren Air Force Base Fact Sheets. Accessed 03/29/24 at <https://www.warren.af.mil/About-Us/Fact-Sheets/>

² Source: U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts. Accessed 03/29/24 at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/laramiecountywyoming,cheyennecitywyoming/PST045223>

³ Ibid.

compared to the national mean travel time of 26.7 minutes. Traffic is low, drivers considerate, and neighborhoods quiet.

Demographic Summary: City of Cheyenne and Laramie County		
	City of Cheyenne	Laramie County
Total Population	64,610 (2022)	100,984 (2023)
Persons under 18 years (%)	21.1%	22.3%
Persons 65 years plus (%)	17.5%	17.4%
White alone (%)	83.9%	91.4%
Black or African American alone (%)	2.9%	2.5%
American Indian and Alaska Native alone (%)	0.80%	1.3%
Two or more races (%)	7.5%	3.2%
Hispanic or Latino	16.5%	15.8%

While High School Graduation rates (2018-2022) are consistent between the city and county (both at 94%), the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that the proportion of people with a bachelor’s degree or above is slightly higher in Cheyenne (31.3%) than in the county (30.5%) as a whole. Nationally, the average of persons aged 25 years or older with a bachelor’s degree or higher is 34.3%.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports (2023) that the proportion of persons living in poverty in Cheyenne (8.5%) and Laramie County (10.2%) is just slightly lower than the national average during the same time period (2023; 11.5%). Persons without health insurance (under the age of 65 years) was higher in the county (13.0%) as compared to the City of Cheyenne (9.3%) which mirrors the 2023 national average of 9.3%. Finally, the average median household income (2022 dollars) from 2018-2022 for the City of Cheyenne was \$ 74,989 as compared to the county at \$ 76,282. National median household income in the same period was \$ 75,149.

Approximately 71% of people in the county own their own homes. The median value of owner-occupied houses (2018-2022) was \$ 283,100 in the city of Cheyenne and \$ 295,800 in Laramie County.⁴ Home prices in the area continue to increase as more retirees move to the area and the City of Cheyenne continues to explore ways to provide more affordable housing. The median gross rent during the same period was \$ 993.00 (Cheyenne) and \$ 1,043 (Laramie County).

⁴ Ibid.

Recreation: Undoubtedly, one of the most compelling reasons to relocate to Cheyenne Wyoming is the natural beauty that surrounds Front Range region. For those who love skiing, rock-climbing, rafting, hiking, or photography, the Front Range has it all and more.

From Curt Gowdy State Park to Vedauwoo Recreation area (both about 30 minutes from Cheyenne) to the Snowy Range Area of Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests (just over an hour drive), southeastern Wyoming is a playground for those who love the outdoors.



Granite Springs Reservoir
Curt Gowdy State Park

Yellowstone National Park is a 7 to 10 hour drive (depending on the season) from southeastern Wyoming with the Grand Teton National Park about 7 hours away. And the mountains of The Bighorn National Forest are only 4 hours north of Cheyenne.



Rocky Mountain National Park

The Rocky Mountain National Park is also very accessible with the town of Estes Park, Colorado just under a two-hour drive from Cheyenne. If red-rock viewing is in order, a trip to Canyonlands National Park in Utah is an easy one-day drive. Western Nebraska holds many treasures for those who love the outdoors and South Dakota's Black Hills is about five hours north of the region.

For those who like the "Big City" life, Denver Colorado is a 2 hour drive south from Cheyenne with world-class restaurants, entertainment, and medical facilities. Fort Collins, a Front Range community with many amenities, is only one hour away.

In summary, Laramie County is an inviting location with wonderful local restaurants, an award-winning regional hospital (Cheyenne Regional Medical Center), educational opportunities and outdoor activities. The "Magic City of the Plains" awaits!

Church Ministries and Activities

Highlands Presbyterian Church has a nine-member Session (Board) that meets monthly via Zoom. There are three “classes” with three members per class, for a total of nine (9) Session members. A new class is elected annually. The Clerk of Session has been in this role since mid-2019. Session members lead the following committees: 1) Building and Grounds; 2) Fellowship; and 3) Mission. Highlands currently has no Worship Ministry and no Bible Study.

Building and Grounds: Given the age of our building, it is reasonable to assume that this committee is very active. From overseeing roof repairs to updating fixtures, from lawn maintenance to snow removal, this small team keeps our building and grounds in top shape. Activities in 2022 and 2023 included overseeing new trees planted on the grounds, fixing a major sewer issue in the building, Zoom equipment updates, and the instillation of LED lights throughout the building.

Fellowship: This committee assures that Highlands is a friendly and welcoming church. They are charged with congregational care and all activities at Highlands including greeters, after-church coffee providers, and communion servers.

Events coordinated in 2023 include lunches for visitors from the Wind River Reservation and North Denver Mosque, meals for several funerals of beloved Highlands members, and a farewell dinner for our cherished pastor Rev. Rodger McDaniel. Other activities included Lenten Soup Suppers, Easter Breakfast, a summer church picnic, and a Thanksgiving luncheon.

Twice-monthly coffee hours are held in the Narthex. Those attending reach out to members of our congregation who need prayers and support. Members also decorate the Sanctuary for holidays.

Highlands also has two book clubs; one in-person and one on Zoom. Books to study vary widely and are selected to challenge members to set aside preconceived beliefs and to grow spiritually. A sample of titles is provided at right.

Sample of Titles Read by Highlands Book Clubs

- ◆ “The 1619 Project” by Nikole Hannah-Jones
- ◆ “Misquoting Jesus” by Bart D. Ehrman
- ◆ “Neither Wolf Nor Dog” by Kent Nerburn
- ◆ “Jesus and John Wayne” by Kristin Kobes Du Mez
- ◆ “The First Christmas” by Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan
- ◆ “White Fragility” by Robin Diangelo
- ◆ “Monday’s Not Coming” by Tiffany D. Jackson

Mission: This committee embraces the heart of Highlands. Led by a team of two Highland's members, they plan for on-going support of numerous community organizations and receive requests for new support. Assessment of what is possible, given the size of our congregation, is always a consideration. More about the activities that Highlands support follow.

1. Afghan Refugees at North Denver Mosque In 2021 Highlands became involved in the support of Afghan Refugees who were relocated to the Denver area. Initially providing donated household items, support increased to include financial support for families. Highlands made a commitment to the Mosque to "give or get" \$1,500 monthly to be used for whatever needs the program organizers identified. Some months it covered rent for families; other months a used car or an appliance may be purchased. Highlands has also been a catalyst to encourage other Wyoming faith communities to support refugee families. Support has come from First Presbyterian Church (Cheyenne), St. Mark's Episcopal Church (Casper), Mt. Sinai Synagogue (Cheyenne), St. Paul's Newman Center (Laramie), and a number of anonymous donors.

2. Hunger Action Highlands is a Hunger Action Congregation. To be certified as a Hunger Action congregation, the following requirements must be met: Hunger Alleviation; Development Assistance; Hunger Education; Lifestyle Integrity; Corporate and Public Policy Witness; and Worship.

Activities undertaken by this committee are too numerous to include in this report but highlights include advocacy to maintain and improve SNAP benefits; the contribution of soil for the Wind River Food Sovereignty Project; monthly state-wide Hunger Action meeting attendance; program support for Just Caring for unhoused individuals; support for Climb Wyoming, an agency that helps single mothers develop workplace skills to benefit their children; and an annual Hunger Action Sunday to educate the congregation about hunger issues.

3. Lenten Fund For many years, Highland collected funds to provide support to those in need with requests under \$100.00. The Lenten Fund started during the Lenten season with funds used to provide gas cards, to help pay rent or utilities, or for a hotel room on a cold winter night. Later, \$50.00 Walmart Cards replaced cash for requests



with limits placed on individuals annually. Occasionally, a larger request would be made to help with utilities, rent, or automobile repair. These “special requests” would be addressed as funds allowed. No strings were attached to these gifts.

After the COVID-19 epidemic swept the nation, requests for Walmart cards exponentially increased, becoming unwieldy for the congregation to support, with requests often exceeding \$ 1,000.00 per month.

In late 2023, a change was proposed by several members of Session. Highlands had historically supported the work of Recover Wyoming, whose purpose is to “increase the occurrence and quality of long-term recovery from substance use disorder across Wyoming communities through education, advocacy, training, and peer recovery support services”. Recover Wyoming had a new program called “The Quality of Life Fund”⁵ which was created to provide occasional emergency support to those working on long-term recovery. The goal of the program was similar to that of the Lenten Fund; the provision of small grants to support individuals in need for problems that could derail the recovery process such as rent payment, car repairs, gas cards, and testing fee coverage. Peer coaches would recommend individuals who were in need of help. In early 2024, Session voted to support this program starting with a gift of \$ 500.00 per month.

4. Wind River Indian Reservation

Highlands created an endowment⁶ for Central Wyoming Community College in May of 2021 to assist indigenous students with emergency needs and to help them remain in school. Funds generated pay for essentials like rent, car repairs, books, testing fees, gas cards, and other expenses (beyond tuition) that students often experience.



Highlands Members at Central Wyoming College 2021

A second program providing support for the residents of Wind River is Highland’s Indigenous Reparations Fund. This program, created by Highlands members through a lengthy discernment process, requires that each month, a \$ 500.00 voluntary

⁵ Recently renamed “The Step Up Program”.

⁶ The Highlands United Presbyterian Church Emergency Fund.

“land-tax” is placed in reserve for projects generated by tribal members of the Wind River Reservation. Highlands holds the accrued funds until grant requests are approved by both tribes (Northern Arapaho and Eastern Shoshone). Ideas for funding must be generated by residents of Wind River; not Highlands. Today this fund contains more than \$ 16,000.00. The current project focus is the creation of three food pantries on the Reservation (Map, Appendix A) but other projects may qualify. .

5. Local Missions We supported the following organizations in 2023 (Appendix B):

- ◆ Riverton Peace Mission in Riverton, WY (\$ 1,200.00)
- ◆ More Light Presbyterians (\$ 500.00)
- ◆ Syria Lebanon Fund (\$ 1,000.00)
- ◆ Comea Shelter, Family Promise, Meals on Wheels, Needs, Inc. Food Pantry, and St. Joseph’s Food Pantry (Local agencies @ \$ 600.00 total per agency annually)
- ◆ Recover Wyoming (\$ 2,400.00)
- ◆ My Front Door (\$ 1,200.00)



Linda Dixon, Hunger Action Chair, presents Needs Inc. a special donation during the early part of the COVID Epidemic (May 2020).



Pet food for Animals at the Cheyenne Animal Shelter, in memory of Highland's "Church Dog" Silvie, with her Dad, Howie Zabel.



Blankets for Residents of Wind River Indian Reservation, 2021

Financial Review

At the end of calendar year 2023, Highlands had Unrestricted Receipts (pledges, offering plate, building rental, bequests and legacies) of \$136,356. Restricted receipts totaled \$46,777. Total receipts were \$183,134.⁷

During the same period, Disbursements were as follows: Personnel (\$ 62,461; Building and Grounds (\$24,896); Fellowship (\$26,541); Discretionary Spending Missions (\$11,353); Restricted Missions Funds (\$37,934). Total Disbursements were \$163,186.⁸

Highlands does not have any full-time employees at present, but several individuals are working on a part-time or contractual basis for the church. These include:

1. **Accountant/Treasurer:** Charles R. Killion
2. **Transition Coordinator** (temporary position⁹): Lorie Wayne Chesnut
3. **Zoom Coordinator:** Ayden Sherar
4. **Custodian:** Ayden Sherar
5. **Musician:** Paula Egan-Wright

During the Transition period, guest preachers and speakers are provided with an honorarium of \$150. If they travel to Cheyenne to make their presentation in person, an additional \$100 is added for travel expenses.

Two financial accounts are important aspects of Highlands financial picture and were not discussed within the Mission Activities portion of this report.

Future Fund: First, in late 2017, a special account was created called Highland's Future Fund. This fund was initiated to ease the financial strain on the church during a future pastoral transition. Each month since it was developed, a minimum of \$500 has been transferred into the Future Fund account. The current total for this fund is \$150,408 (3/31/24) and it continues to grow. These funds can be used to cover future moving expenses, pastoral salary and benefits as needed. Session is responsible for monitoring and allocating these funds.

⁷ In addition to this total, Highlands works with the National Syrian Lebanon Partnership (NSLP) providing bookkeeping/accounting expertise. Funds from this SLPN are received into and expended from a designated SLPN savings account. Since these funds are not under the control of our church, they are not included in this report.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In place until a new Pastor is hired. This position helps to facilitate services and acts as a liaison with the Wyoming Presbytery on matters associated with the transition.

Matthew 25 Fund: In 1995, a generous parishioner gave a gift to the Bethel Presbyterian Church in Waterloo (IA) to be used for non-local mission(s) work. The purpose of this gift was twofold; to build investment expertise at recipient churches and to expand outreach opportunities for the faith communities.

Requirements were as follows: 1) The receiving church agreed to invest the money in an actively managed account, separate from the existing church governing body. 2) Each year half of any profits must be used for non-local mission work while the other half remains in the account for growth. 3) Once the invested total reaches \$80,000 it is split, with \$40,000 given to another church to be used in a similar fashion. Westminster Presbyterian Church in Fort Collins received the funds in 2008 and in 2021 needed to pass \$ 40,000 to another church.

Highlands applied for these funds and was selected as the recipient in late 2021. As of 03/31/2024, the account balance was \$ 50,247. Two donations (totaling \$2,044) have been made from this account following gains in January 2022; to the Community Foundation of Boulder County Wildfire Fund and for the Sister Carmen Community Center. Both were used to help families impacted by the Marshall Fire which devastated Boulder County in late 2021.

About Our Congregation (2023)	
Active Members	56
White/Caucasian	95%
Age 56 or above	91%
Female	70%
Friends of the Congregation	55
Average Weekly Worship Attendance	67
Ruling Elders on Session	9
Youth	NA
From the 2023 Church Statistical Report for Highlands Presbyterian	

Church Grounds and Facilities

The Grounds: Highlands Presbyterian resides on a small hill in the Buffalo Ridge neighborhood. A portion of the original land purchase was sold to the city for a small community park. The building is surrounded by a windbreak of pines planted many years ago by the Laramie County Conservation District (LCCD) with the help of a local Boy Scout troop.



New Trees 2023

Over the past two years, additional trees have been added to the grounds of Highlands through a community grant received from LCCD. Planners hope to make the grounds more welcoming to neighborhood families.

As an Earth Care Congregation, Highlands volunteers planted native plants and pollinators in a garden on the south side of the property. Volunteers regularly provide maintenance including trash pick-up, weeding, and watering.



Highlands Produce 2014

For many years, Highlands volunteers maintained a vegetable garden on the property; produce grown was shared with local food programs. As members aged, maintaining the extensive garden became more and more challenging until the program ended several years ago.

Highlands has two parking areas; one in front of the

church which includes a small, level paved parking area and a larger sloping gravel lot. The back of the church (where two entrances to the Fellowship Hall are located) includes a large, level, gravel parking area.

Picnics are often held on this portion of the property, with easy access to kitchen facilities and shade from large trees on the property.



Food and Fellowship during Neighborhood Night Out, Highlands 2018

The Building: Highlands was built in 1967 with 4,500 square feet on the first and second floors with an additional 3,500 in the basement area for a total area of 8,000 square feet. The building is insured by Insurance Board (Cleveland, OH).

Upon entering Highlands, the first thing that a visitor will see is the etched window recognizing that our church was built on the ancestral lands of the Cheyenne and the Arapaho. This window was installed in 2023 with special guests from Wind River Indian Reservation assisting in the dedication.



"You are worshipping God on the ancestral lands of the Tsétséhestaestse (Cheyenne) and the Hinono'eiteen (Arapaho), and other Indigenous nations. Highlands honors their sovereignty and their courage by acknowledging the injustices visited upon them through the dispossession of these lands."

Entering the large Narthex area, congregants view comfortable chairs, a fireplace, and a small kitchen area where The Lord's Supper is prepared. A number of small storage areas surround the Narthex, providing ample space for supplies and equipment. Off of the Narthex is a small church office and conference room.



Sanctuary

Highland's Sanctuary is a beautiful space, facing the morning sun during services with stained glass windows and its signature Rose Window. Wooden pews face the altar with moveable padded chairs placed along both sides of the room. Two television screens are mounted to the right and left of the altar, providing attendees an opportunity to view Zoom speakers. At

the rear of the Sanctuary is the Grand Piano used during services and an array of equipment for Zoom services. Attendees can enter easily from the back of the Sanctuary without disturbing the service; an important feature of the redesign completed in 2014.

One limitation of the church building is the lack of an elevator; a mobility challenge for many of the current members. Several years ago, a stairwell chairlift was installed from the Sanctuary to the downstairs Fellowship area. While this serves a purpose,

many members hesitate to use it. Explorations were made about adding an elevator several years ago, but the costs were deemed too high for our church.

Two sets of stairs lead up from the Narthex to a currently underutilized portion of the building. This area was once used as a small apartment, and features three large rooms with a wall of windows overlooking the property. The upstairs has great potential for a pastor's retreat or office, church library, or meeting space.

Moving downstairs from the Narthex, a visitor enters a meeting area with a nursery, several smaller meeting/class rooms, and large Fellowship Room with a full kitchen. It is here that meals are shared and meetings held throughout the year. Highlands regularly holds Lenten Soup Suppers, Easter Breakfast, a summer picnic, Thanksgiving Dinner, and other gatherings as needed.

With two entrances from the lower parking area, this space regularly hosts Recover Wyoming Peer Trainings and members of the Cheyenne Camera Club as well as other local non-profits.



Activities and dinners in Highland's Fellowship Hall, named in honor of Rev. James Clark, Pastor from 1989-1993.

Planning For Our Future

In 2017, Highlands Presbyterian undertook a strategic planning process to identify mission priorities for the church. This project spanned five months and was led by a strategic planning professional who donated their services. The goal was twofold: 1) to review and revise Highland's Vision, Mission, and Values, and 2) to identify working priorities for the next several years.

The first step in the process was a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats/Challenges) analysis. After an introductory meeting to discuss the SWOT process, participants¹⁰ were led through the individual categories and challenged to discuss each within their small group. At the close of the meeting, they presented their selections for each of the four categories. Similar themes were combined, and a summary of nine (9) priorities remained; gleaned from the "Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats" portion of the exercise. After refinement, nine priorities were presented to the entire congregation with every person allotted six (6) votes.¹¹ Ballots were mailed to assure that everyone that was part of Highlands received the information.

Three major categories were identified through this process: 1) Mission & Outreach; 2) Pastoral Succession; and 3) Membership & Growth. A total of 48 people voted and the final rank of the nine priorities is provided below:

1. Highlands Has A Future Fund (Pastoral Succession) 19.1%
2. Highlands Community Profile (Membership & Growth) 16.3%
3. Sanctuary Church Involvement (Mission & Outreach) 15.9%
4. Increased Community Outreach & Partnerships (Membership & Growth) 11.0%
5. Increased Interfaith Collaborations (Membership & Growth) 10.6%
6. Wind River Reservation (Mission & Outreach) 9.5%
7. Children's Church (Membership & Growth) 7.4%
8. Membership Drive (Membership & Growth) 5.3%
9. Syrian/Lebanon Partnership (Mission & Outreach) 4.9%

¹⁰ This opportunity was open to the entire congregation.

¹¹ All could be used to support a single priority or votes could be distributed in any combination. But no more than six votes could be cast per person.

In 2022, strategic planning using SWOT was revisited again. With 52 people submitting comments, results were as follows:¹²

- ◆ **Strengths:** 1) Mission & Outreach, 2) Fellowship, 3) Inclusivity/Diversity, 4) Pastoral Leadership/Worship, 5) Social Justice
- ◆ **Weaknesses:** 1) Membership & Growth
- ◆ **Opportunities:** 1) Mission & Outreach, 2) Membership & Growth
- ◆ **Challenges:** 1) Membership & Growth

Clearly, the top challenge for Highlands at this time is attracting younger families to our faith community. In early 2023, Highlands created a nursery and has a budget line-item to pay a future nursery attendant. Several individuals have been identified and screened through background checks to assist with childcare services. At present, our focus continues to be with our mission work and providing help to “the least of these”. **Membership and growth will be a priority for new leadership.**



Women's March, Cheyenne 2017

¹² The category of “Strengths” had many competing, close totals. The other categories had one or two clear winners with all others far below in totals.

Congregational Transition Activities

In November 2023, following the retirement of Rev. McDaniel, Highlands members and friends began preparations for new leadership. This started with a series of “One Minute Questions” during Sunday services in mid-November. As they were greeted, participants were given a short form with a single question and asked to respond to the question before leaving that day. Zoom participants were requested to complete the same question over the platform.

The most important of these questions was **what ONE thing made them proudest of Highlands?** Twenty-seven (27) people responded to this question for a response rate of 44% that day. Below is a sample of answers provided by our congregation. Responses were compiled into a Word Cloud¹³ for this report. “Social Justice” was the phrase mentioned the most often during exercise.

Tell us the one thing that makes you proudest of Highlands Presbyterian Church.

- ◆ Inclusive, progressive community blending traditional religious teachings with social justice and demonstrating how that looks in the community and in the world.
- ◆ The Christian Commitment to social justice, lifting up the oppressed and least among us through prayers, words, finances, and deeds.
- ◆ Highlands doesn't just “talk the talk”, it goes beyond and rises to the challenge by “walking the walk”.
- ◆ Generous congregation and mission that provides care and support for the community with no expectations, no strings attached.
- ◆ Living in an environment [sic] to be comfortable with a Jesus that I can understand and believe in.
- ◆ Social work – particularly when the community may not approve of our choices.
- ◆ Openness, freedom, acceptance in worship service. Welcoming spirit.
- ◆ Progressive church that tries to compensate for injustice.
- ◆ The ability to have an opposing view and to not be judged.
- ◆ Progressive teaching, courageous concern for others.
- ◆ Generosity of time and treasure is extraordinary.
- ◆ The loving and giving spirit of all the people.



¹³ The size of the word represents the number of times that it was mentioned by participants.
<https://www.wordclouds.com/>

PCUSA Competencies: Throughout the month of January, Highlands educated congregants about the thirty-three competencies used by the PCUSA to guide prospective pastors and congregations in the match process. Several in-person and Zoom meetings were held to help them consider how their vision for Highlands related to the competencies listing. In mid-January, each member and friend of Highlands was mailed an introduction to the voting process, a listing of all thirty-three competencies, and a ballot. They were asked to select only ten (10) competencies and given three weeks to respond.

Seventy (70) responses were received, including 42 members (representing 82% of the total membership) and 24 “friends” of Highlands. A complete competencies listing, by category, is provided in the Appendices (Appendix C).

Highlands would like to thank Rev. Guy Helms for his help with this exercise. Thanks also to Rev. James McLennan for his work with our congregation as they struggled to identify competencies important to them.

Top Ten¹⁴ Competencies for a Future Pastor Highlands Presbyterian		
	Simple Rank	# of Votes
Preaching and Worship Leadership	1	43
Compassionate	2	42
Communicator	3	40
Spiritual Maturity	4	36
Flexibility	5	32
Interpersonal Engagement	5	32
Strategy and Vision	6	30
Lifelong Learner	7	29
Collaboration	8	28
Teacher	9	27
Motivator	10	26

¹⁴ The next “tier” included: Risk Taker (25); Public Communicator (24); Culturally Proficient (24); Willing to Engage in Conflict (24); Hopeful (23); Bridge-Builder (23); Change Agent (20); Advisor (18); Contextualization (17); Initiative (16); Self-Differentiation (16); Personal Resilience (16); Organizational Agility (15); Decision-Making (13); Tech Savvy (12).

Concluding Statements

Highlands Presbyterian is a dynamic church with an educated, committed, and generous congregation. As noted on the report cover, Highlands “takes the bible seriously, but not literally”. Highlands prides itself on being a progressive and curious faith community; unafraid to question, explore, and challenge the status quo.

We lift individuals up and, as the only More Light congregation in Wyoming, we “*value diversity and God’s children without judgement. We welcome all persons regardless of race, sexual orientation or identity, immigration status, or other characteristics that may define cultural differences*”. We also encourage full participation of LGBTQIA+ people in life, ministry, and witness of the church.

Highlands is searching for a leader that will inspire, educate, and lead us into the future.

“Highlands is the reflection of grace – toward each other and in our missions.”

- Highlands Member, 2023



Prayer Vigil, 2020 in support of DACA youth and opposing the immigrant prison proposed in Evanston, Wyoming.

Layout and design for this document provided by Lorie Wayne Chesnut, DrPH, MPH; Highlands Transition Coordinator and Clerk of Session.

Appendices

Appendix A. Wind River Indian Reservation (Google Maps)

The Wind River Indian Reservation is the home to two tribal nations; Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho. With a land mass of approximately 2.2 million acres, it is the seventh largest American Indian Reservation in the United States. The Reservation includes portions of the Wind River Range, the Absaroka Range, and the Owl Creek Mountains. It spans portions of Fremont County and Hot Springs County.



Riverton WY, home of Central Wyoming College (CWC)
and The Riverton Peace Mission (RPM)

Appendix B. Select Local/Regional Non-Profits Regularly Supported by Highlands Presbyterian

- ◆ **Central Wyoming College (Riverton, WY)**: Transforming lives and strengthening communities through learning, leadership, and connection.
- ◆ **Comea Shelter**: Provides housing services, free meals, case management, and limited transportation assistance for anyone who is homeless or at high risk for homelessness.
- ◆ **Family Promise of Cheyenne**: Offers children and their families in crisis safe shelter, resources, education, and fellowship to achieve sustainable independence.
- ◆ **Food Bank of Wyoming**: The mission of Food Bank of Wyoming is to ignite the power of community to nourish people facing hunger.
- ◆ **Masjid Ikhlas** – Metro Denver North Islamic Center in Northglenn, CO.
- ◆ **Meals on Wheels of Cheyenne**: The mission of Meals on Wheels of Cheyenne, Inc. is to support the independence, health and well-being of individuals living in Cheyenne and Laramie County with an expressed need for nutritional support through the delivery of nutritious meals, friendly visits and safety checks.
- ◆ **My Front Door**: Providing real housing solutions for Wyoming.
- ◆ **Needs, Inc.**: Provides food, essentials, and resources to Laramie County residents during their times of adversity.
- ◆ **Recover Wyoming**: Provides support to people seeking long-term recovery from addiction, and supports their family and friends.
- ◆ **Riverton Peace Mission (Riverton, WY)**: RPM engages in truth-telling to address systemic bordertown violence and injustice towards tribal people of the Wind River Indian Reservation to advance healing, reconciliation, and community harmony. RPM supports tribal sovereignty with reconciliation and shared appreciation of cultural diversity and inclusion, and seeks equitable collaboration among the governments and service providers.
- ◆ **St. Joseph's Food Pantry**: A non-profit food pantry in Cheyenne, WY.
- ◆ **The Welcome Mat**: a community non-profit organization working for and with the homeless in Cheyenne, WY.

Appendix C: PCUSA Competencies

THEOLOGICAL/SPIRITUAL INTERPRETER

Compassionate – having the ability to suffer with others; being motivated by others pain and is called into action as advocate; is motivated by caring for others while concurrently keeping the organizational goals clearly in focus.

Hopeful – maintains stability in the moment and hope for the future; provides direction, guidance, and faith when describing basic needs; and helps followers to see a way through chaos and complexity.

Preaching and Worship Leadership: Is a consistently effective preacher and worship leader; is able to inspire from the pulpit; communicates a clear and consistent message through sermons that are carefully prepared and artfully delivered; projects the identity and character of the congregation through worship leadership presence.

Spiritual Maturity: Shows strong personal depth and spiritual grounding; demonstrates integrity by walking the talk and by responding with faithfulness of purpose; is seen by others as trustworthy and authentic; nurtures a rich spiritual life; seeks the wisdom and guidance of appropriate mentors; is able to articulate a clear and consistent theology.

Lifelong Learner – individuals who use every experience in life as a potential tool for growth; one who pursues continuing education; and those who build on strengths and seek assistance to improve weaknesses.

Teacher – creates learning environments where students are active participants as individuals and as members of collaborative groups; designs lesson plans that teach concepts, facts, and theology; effectively uses multiple learning tools to reach a wide variety of learners; revises instructional strategies based upon ministry/organization context.

COMMUNICATION

Communicator - Advances the abilities of individuals and the organizations through active listening supported with meaningful oral and written presentation of information.

Bilingual – having the ability to use two languages, especially with equal or nearly equal fluency; able to use multiple languages in communication.

Public Communicator - Demonstrates a comfortable ease when speaking in a variety of settings (both small and large groups); is effective at addressing a variety of topics; can get messages across with the desired effect.

Media Communicator: Has experience developing materials for a variety of written or multimedia forms of communications (print, Internet-based, social media, etc.).

Technologically Savvy - the ability to successfully navigate the world of technology using software, blogging, multi-media, and websites as tools for ministry.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Advisor – an individual others turn to for counsel and guidance; provides coaching; expertise for congregations or other organizations.

Change Agent – having the ability to lead the change process successfully; anchoring the change in the congregations'/organizations' vision and mission.

Contextualization – the ability to assess accurately the context, environment, history, relationships and uniqueness of a congregation or organization.

Culturally Proficient – having solid understanding of the norms, values and common behaviors of various peoples, including direct experience working in multiple cultural and cross-cultural settings.

Externally Aware - identifies and keeps informed of the polity of the church; maintains current with laws, regulations, policies, procedures, trends, and developments both internally and in the larger society.

Entrepreneurial - leaders that are creative in using resources; identifies opportunities to develop; is willing to take risks, initiates actions that involve a deliberate risk to achieve a recognized benefit or advantage.

Risk Taker – persons with the ability to take appropriate risk to accomplish needed goals; one who thinks outside the box and who is not afraid of challenging the status-quo.

Task Manager - Assures that effective controls are developed and maintained to ensure the integrity of the organization; holds self and others accountable for rules and responsibilities; can be relied upon to ensure that projects within areas of specific responsibility are completed in a timely manner and within budget; and monitors and evaluates plans, focuses on results and measuring attainment of outcomes.

Willingness to Engage Conflict: Steps up to conflicts, seeing them as opportunities; reads situations quickly; good at focused listening; can identify common ground and elicit cooperation from others in crafting mutual solutions.

Decision Making: Makes effective decisions, balancing analysis, wisdom, experience, and judgment; is aware of the long term implications of choices made; is generally regarded as offering solutions and suggestions that are correct and effective.

Organizational Agility: Is astute about how congregations and/or organizations work; knows how to get things done through formal and informal channels; understands the importance of supporting good policy, practice, and procedure; appreciates the power in the culture of a congregation; is politically savvy.

Strategy and Vision: Sees ahead clearly, keeping focused on the larger picture; can anticipate future consequences and trends accurately; is future oriented; casts a compelling and inspired vision for a preferred future; sees possibility; crafts breakthrough strategies.

Financial Manager – deliver results by maximizing organizational effectiveness and sustainability through the best use of available financial resources; allocates and manages finances transparently; implements strategies to achieve operational efficiencies and value for money; puts in place rigorous and comprehensive financial accountability systems.

Funds Developer – maintains the ability to solicit donations used to fund the budget of the organization; effectively expresses the needs for funds to potential donors; responsible for adding new potential donors to the organization's contact list; prepares statement of planned activities and enlists support for mission initiatives.

Collaboration: a natural orientation toward getting people to work together; shares wins and successes; fosters open dialogue; lets people finish and be responsible for their work; creates strong feelings of belonging among group members; is a good judge of talent and can accurately assess the strengths and limitations of others.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

Interpersonal Engagement - Displays a consistent ability to build solid relationships of trust and respect inside and outside of the organization; engage people, organizations, and partners in developing goals, executing plans, and delivering results; use negotiation skills and adaptability to encourage recognition of joint concerns, collaboration, and to influence the success of outcomes.

Bridge Builder – possessing a certain responsibility for the unity of the congregation and/or organization; works to connect people of different cultures, worldviews, and theological positions.

Motivator - Creates and sustains an organizational culture which permits others to provide the quality of service essential to high performance. Enables others to acquire the tools and support they need to perform well; and influences others toward a spirit of service and meaningful contributions to mission accomplishment.

Personal Resilience: Learns from adversity and failure; picks up on the need to change personal, interpersonal, and leadership behaviors; deals well with ambiguity; copes effectively with change; can decide and act without having the total picture; comfortably handles risk and uncertainty; seeks feedback; expresses personal regret when appropriate.

Initiative: Demonstrates ambition; is highly motivated; is action oriented and full of energy for things seen as challenging; seizes opportunity; pushes self and others to achieve desired results.

Flexibility - Adapts behavior and work methods in response to new information, changing conditions, unexpected obstacles, or ambiguity; remains open to new ideas and approaches; and works concurrently on related and conflicting priorities without losing focus or attention.

Self-Differentiation: Demonstrates strong and appropriate personal boundaries in relationships; has a healthy appreciation of self, without being egotistical; is emotionally mature; can maintain a less- anxious presence in the midst of turmoil; is not overly dependent upon outside affirmation; works to build a strong personal support system.



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