

Notes from the March 10, 2019 Circle Conversation Led by the Fulfilling Our Vision Ad Hoc Committee – United Church of Strafford, Vermont

Attendees: Christina Robinson, Tom Kinder, Joey and John Hawkins, Kate Reimanis, Gretchen Hannon, Herbert and Mel Goertz, Meg Albee, Jim Schley, Becky Bailey, Ingrid and David Webb, Shannon Varley, Danette Harris

Introduction: We reviewed the process so far (see notes from January 6th, February 17th and March 3rd). The goal of this entire process is to discern how our congregation feels called to fulfill the part of our Future Directions Vision that says “We intend to be a force, not merely a presence, effecting positive social change for peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.” A secondary goal is to design a process for the congregation to study and decide on proposals for specific actions as they arise in the future.

This meeting again followed the restorative justice circle format where we speak from our own perspective and don’t comment on what others have said. It is a listening circle—most of what we do is listen to others and even when we speak we are trying to listen to the Spirit speaking, or our innermost voice. The purpose of this format is to allow every person in the circle to have the opportunity to be heard. We listen with care and compassion in order to understand, though not necessarily agree. The process allows our collective wisdom to speak, and honors the contributions of the full range of opinions and considerations, including those that contradict one another. All are met with respect and all contribute directly or indirectly to the path we eventually follow. This format can feel strange or frustrating, but the results are usually unifying and inspired, creating a closer and more effective community.

We have come to the final question in this process:

How specifically do you see our congregation acting as a force in the near future effecting positive social change for peace, justice and the care of God’s creation? What do you feel we need to do now?

- I would like to propose that we focus on climate change. I do earnestly believe that anything addressing the multitude of other issues is moot if the planet is facing disasters we can still have some chance of ameliorating. It is a commitment that most can support, and it plays into the emphasis emerging in the Bill Coffin event with the talk by Jim Antal. It is clearly in our scriptures to care for the earth, a principle woefully ignored. If it seems we could do little to effect the changes needed, it also seems that action on the local level is essential. It is not exactly the Golden Rule, though it is in the sense that we all need to help each other to avoid the clearly mounting disasters. Problems of lesser dimension might be harder to unite around. Expert advice on what we could do is available to us in town and nearby.
- I am interested in indigenous people. The Mission committee has supported the Winter Center, a local Abenaki group trying to preserve their culture and put together a museum. I would like to see the church continue to support indigenous people locally and in the nation.

- I would like us to respond to Christa's original request by making a public statement, such as in the form of a banner. Also, do things within the community relating to climate change and to living by the Golden Rule. Partner with other churches, specifically those involved in the Bill Coffin events.
- Climate change. Feeling overwhelmed but we could be a voice and take action.
- 1) Climate change is key. Impossible for one congregation to do a lot but there are lots of good opportunities for action. 2) We need to be very clear about meeting people's needs whether they are related to climate change or not, and doing so locally. Make sure people know that helping people in need remains an emphasis. The rummage sale touches on both – keeps clothes and stuff recycling and also provides very low-cost options to people who need them.
- 1) Climate change. Could the church get solar panels? Did we already look into that? 2) Honor Christa's request for a sign, "All are welcome without exception". Beautiful wooden hand painted sign, fits with aesthetic of the upper village. 3) Also let people know we're still rolling up our sleeves, helping neighbors.
- 1) Christa's request; 2) Climate change; 3) Winter Center / Abenaki. I want to support these things however I can.
- Small personal steps to reduce our footprint. We could each set a goal to reduce our driving by 10-20% by being thoughtful about it, carpooling with others. Would make a difference.
- Main issue is climate change. I like to write letters – we can write letters to our representatives about more than one issue.
- I tend to be a broad overview thinker, but I love these very specific ideas. I don't want to limit us. Let's grab onto some concrete ideas, and accomplish them. "When you pray, move your feet—and don't shuffle." Marching is more powerful when you are with a group or church. I'd like to see us participating in marches and the like. Green New Deal has been criticized as too big, too lofty. "Make no little plans, they have no magic." Why not think big, reach high. I don't want anything to be shut down. Christa's idea is important as are others.
- I like the sign that John H. has shown from his daughter and love the Strafford Unitarian-Universalist signs. Maybe have a sign that changes, saying lots of different things. I am excited by the abundance and aspirations of the Green New Deal, and love the historical link to the New Deal. Brilliance is in its bountifulness.
- In this time, we as a Christian church need to tell the world what our values are regarding other people. Make a statement. Issues such as the VT legislator hounded by racial taunts. What we could put in front of the church to say that the value of each human being is irrefutable. We should make this statement. But the bulk of the action would focus on climate change. I love the idea that we as individuals and a church community show that we have made this commitment and look what we've been able to do to reduce our carbon footprint. This is very powerful and something to build on.
- Hanover Episcopal Church has a welcoming banner that I like. Neighbor Helping Neighbor kind of things, people used to meet at the park-and-ride to carpool.

- First, the number one thing the world needs in all these issues is a change of human consciousness. This happens to be what a spiritual community is uniquely qualified to contribute. So in all we do, we should keep in mind that we are seeking to change consciousness and help people evolve to a new developmental level in their perspective as quickly as possible. To that end, we need to study and become experts in how to move ourselves and our society to a new consciousness and new developmental stage. Second, start with a book group with the other churches and anyone else, reading Jim Antal's book, partly because climate is the most urgent timeline issue and will make all the other issues far worse, and partly because that book shows practical tactics that apply to any issue, not just climate. Third, custom make a sign that is designed to help change consciousness, not just advocate positions. It could say "The Golden Rule and Ethic of Love mean..." and then summarize in a series of phrases over time what we have learned in this process. It could be a sign that looks just like the UU's where we put a new set of phrases up every week or month relating to different issues. We could also have other expressions of this, like a banner that includes diverse phrases that will be rotating on the sign and a statement that we publish summarizing what the Golden Rule and ethic of love say to do. Fourth, hold communication training sessions for the town and church in preparation for hosting future circles on controversial issues. Fifth, reflect on what we can do in Strafford and with neighboring towns to increase our Golden Rule and love of neighbor ethic, and to prepare for hard times with increased resilience, mutual dependence and sustainability. Think specifically about potential situations our area may face: drought; Irene-level storms; the need to rely on our local food and water supplies; influxes of climate refugees; the need for local energy generation, etc.
- Sign and climate change.
- Climate change is likely to have unequal effects on different groups of people. It is a justice issue, too.
- It is important for us to remember that the bottom line of church is to make sure people aren't suffering. Even the rummage sale can be helpful to frame that way. 1) \$ from rummage sale gets divided up to different projects, 2) provides a large-scale form of community recycling, 3) Saturday morning lots of people come to very carefully select lots of clothes for very little money.

We went around the circle a second time asking people to reflect on what we had come up with so far.

- A range of things has been presented, some large, some specific. Would it be helpful to have them all written up in a list where we can put sticky notes or check marks beside ideas we support, saying "Here are our ideas, what would we like to move forward on first?"
- Thermometer sign in front of church showing progress of saving gas, this congregation has saved X# gallons of gas by carpooling, have it grow over time, encourage others to help.
- You make the road by walking, a Spanish poem I think fits:

“Wanderer, your footsteps are the road, and nothing more; wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking. By walking one makes the road, and upon glancing behind one sees the path that never will be trod again. Wanderer, there is no road—Only wakes upon the sea.

Caminante, son tus huellas el camino, y nada más; caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar. Al andar se hace camino, y al volver la vista atrás se ve la senda que nunca se ha de volver a pisar. Caminante, no hay camino, sino estelas en la mar.”

— **Antonio Machado, Campos de Castilla**

- Sign out front, opportunity to reflect on who we are and what we believe. Don’t put ourselves in a box with a sign, help people understand us as people with wide open huge hearts, big hearted.
- It would be helpful to have all of the suggested ideas in a list so that we could prioritize.
- Cheerful openness with the sign is a great idea. Book group is a great idea, open it up to the community. Book I love, “Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed” about Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, a Huguenot village in France in WWII who hid their Jewish neighbors. The wife of the pastor who led them, Rev. André Trocmé, would say, “Come in, and come in.”
- I hear and feel a lot of support for a sign/banner and for climate change. 1) List of climate action steps would be useful; 2) Brainstorm for what to go on a banner; 3) Explore other ideas.
- 1) Sign – decisive action that we can do, 2) Climate change, I like the idea of a book group.
- A sign to show our goals and when we’ve reached them. Make it clear both within the church and outside of it. A lot of sign possibilities or visual presentation of accomplishments can be beautiful. People can be resistant because it might mess with their ideas of what is beautiful, eg solar panels or wind turbines don’t match the quintessential VT town. Could make someone who’s never noticed the church say “Hey, what are they doing, looks interesting. . .” Kids are the canary in the coal mine, when they say the church doesn’t feel like their home, we need to make it loud and clear that this place IS their home. Kids are saying, “We’re hurting, please do something.”
- The Fulfilling Our Vision committee can become part of the bouquet of committees, playing a complementary role to the existing committees. A vehicle for initiatives that come up. Allows for continuity. More activist. Mission committee is often very quiet. This committee would be more public. Adults must not hijack this, it should include/be led by younger people. Regarding communication, our church could have a role in town like the Volunteer Fire Department – trained in restorative justice circles, people who are ready to help with conflicts or difficult decisions, recognized in town as being trained and available like the VFD. Also I know a banner maker – banners are different than signs, cloth is different in a good way.
- The process that is emerging from the last two weeks for moving from a specific proposal about something the congregation could do to specific actions seems to be: the Fulfilling

Our Vision committee will turn into an ongoing committee. It will take what has emerged here as a proposal for a process and a list of ideas/actions and come up with specific proposals and actions. It will recruit people and have them sign up for tasks, for book groups, etc. The mission committee was clear that they shouldn't be the ones to take this on, but they should be involved and trustees and Deacons as needed. Different people do different parts. The Fulfilling Our Vision Committee calls in the right people at the right time to move us into action. Everything depends upon how much energy and time people have. We can put out a list and see who signs up for what. Let their feet guide us.

- I love the book group idea, could it be in partnership with library? To add a public element?
- UU's are in on the book group and maybe Catholics.
- Genesis keeps saying in the creation story, "And God saw that it was good." Not made good for us to ruin it. It is a sin against God to undo the goodness that was created. Climate change as a sin against God. Maybe we need to say this.
- I like the ecumenical Thanksgiving service, working with different local faith communities, Catholics, Jews, Buddhists. Once we have a focus on something to offer, have ecumenical service on things like climate change.
- Banner maker— would she lead a banner making workshop with kids? (Maybe, or she could describe how to do it.)
- A structure that everybody understands would be good. Here's how we see the Fulfilling Our Vision committee taking an idea and sorting out how to move it forward...
- This circle is providing a list of potential action items to the FOV committee.
- People look at the walls of the Parish Hall after concerts or the Heartfulness circle. We could have information, inviting and beautiful. Come in, and come in. More people are looking than we realize. Draw in young people.
- Nothing is so good that it can't be made better with glitter.
- Is the current vision committee willing to continue serving? Does it need new membership?
- We need a new ongoing entity in the church to deal with this section of the vision statement. Drop ad hoc, become the Fulfilling Our Vision committee (with a new name?). One idea—people could come in and out of the committee to be involved with specific issues. We need core members and a chair, but others could come and go.
- Last week in the circle I had the sense that the committee would do a good job making sure that decisions are made carefully and inclusively, designing a process to incorporate the congregation's views.
- Yes and once the committee is formed and has operated a while it should go into the bylaws. And the pastor should get a vote in this committee.
- Yes to a committee that chews on things, takes input, gathers ideas and data. How are decisions made?
- We want to be really careful about it being an inclusive process. Not a committee to make decisions without discussing and building support in the congregation on most things. A body that will consider suggestions. What is appropriate way to bring this to the

congregation and bring everybody on board? We might have a study group, bring in speakers, etc, building up to the moment when we'll ask 'some entity' yes or no, such as the church council or a congregational meeting. Or do we educate, discuss, sense consensus and then act?

- We want our feet moving. We want to be intentional and thoughtful but also want to be closer to taking a step. Let's not shuffle. Balance being inclusive and welcoming AND taking steps, not just having meetings.
- We need everyone to know the process of how ideas can be brought to consideration.
- How to get young people involved?
- One way of keeping a core committee and being open to others coming and going: set a monthly meeting for core and anyone who wants to come and let people know the agenda in advance. Moving target meetings are dangerous. Every proposal for action we consider will be so different, some might need more time, more education.
- We need a vehicle to deal with Christa's idea and others like it. We're working on this. Some questions might be easy. We need a place to take suggestions for initiatives. When Dori was here, there weren't paper towels but towels that she washed. This committee would be the place to take that kind of idea, and the committee could simply make those things happen without much deliberation.
- Involve more people, some core and some come and go. Have a referendum in congregation. Sign up to be part of X, Y or Z action. "Do you think we should go forward with this?" and people mark off yes or no.
- This needs to be a permanent group, not an ad hoc one. A regular monthly meeting is very important. Committee should have money and when it decides to do something it shouldn't have to go to church council for approval, just as the Mission Committee doesn't or any other standing committee.
- Once a month check-in sounds good.
- The ad hoc committee can decide how to transition to permanent standing. Anyone else can join the Fulfilling Our Vision committee for a year. It should meet soon.
- We were well served by this process of circle discussions and the high caliber of the facilitating.
- Other facilitators will be trained when we do our communication workshops.
- I really appreciate these circles and the people in them. I am overflowing with gratitude. What a group of thoughtful, compassionate people I happened to land in! Thank you!