

Notes from the March 3, 2019 Circle Conversation Led by the Fulfilling Our Vision Ad Hoc Committee – United Church of Strafford, Vermont

Attendees:

Ingrid Webb, David Webb, Joey Hawkins, John Hawkins, Christa Wurm, Deadra Ashton, Kay Plunkett, Herbert Goertz, Mel Goertz, Bill Williams, Linda Williams, Gretchen Hannon, Shannon Varley, Kim Welsh, Becky Bailey, Jim Schley, Danette Harris, Meg Albee, June Solsaa, Tom Kinder, Christina Robinson

Introduction: We reviewed the process so far (see notes from January 6th and February 17th). 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 will again follow 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 three remaining questions to address.

Question One: What could we do as a congregation, what part could we play, to help our society overcome its obstacles and change its policies and culture so that it would reflect the Golden Rule and ethic of love in all the issue areas on the Parish Hall walls? Speak to this both locally and nationally or globally: what could we possibly do or what part could we play in our community and in the world?

- Look at the organization of our denominations (UCC, ABC), look at their initiatives and decide if we want to take part in them.
- Speak out, raise your voice when staying silent feels wrong, when staying silent feels like it is going against the golden rule.
- Everything feels so enormous. I don’t feel that we as a congregation can have any effect unless we narrow down the scope. I feel like I am swimming in a sea of problems and needs with nowhere to go.
- We could have a structure in the church where these conversations can happen. It could be part of the life of the church for these conversations to be able to take place, to provide the opportunity for mulling over topics, considering action. Church can provide a place and a process.
- I would love to see us do more inviting of others from other cultures, like the Seder supper and the gospel workshop. It is very meaningful to experience another tradition. People bring their own traditions or heritage forth. Beyond action, so much is just about understanding one another, understanding the present circumstances and relationships and also the historical context. What is

the historical context for why two groups of people are bashing heads? I don't always know or understand the context from the past.

- This all sounds good. Education is important. But it is all overwhelming, I can't even begin to imagine how to engage. People feel so passionate and so they turn off, don't listen to anyone else. How can we get around that?
- I desperately want a banner to make a statement out in front of the church – representing what we stand for, including black lives matter and other statements. Then we will be brought into useful conversations with community members questioning what we are doing. It will make us stand up for our beliefs. Running into walls (eg community conversations that are challenging and potentially uncomfortable) is a good thing.
- We need to be good role models. The fastest way to educate is to model behavior. All congregations can model love and understanding and doing unto others according to the Golden Rule.
- Relentless goodwill, through study and learning. It is dangerous to think you know something and then to act; caring isn't enough, knowing matters. We can focus on accomplishing something real, join with other groups. Relentless goodwill in the care of individuals also, providing needed things (food, fuel) and also providing understanding. All of those layers matter.
- Guard against 2 extremes: 1) Feeling that tasks are so enormous that we can't change anything, which leads to lethargy and passivity, giving up, or 2) thinking we can change everything, which leads to disappointment. Voltaire, at the ending of *Candide*, says we have to cultivate our own garden. Transform our wasteland into a flourishing garden of love and light, trust that there are lots of other people who will do the same
- Neighbor Helping Neighbor is that kind of garden, in Tunbridge as well as Strafford. It has been very helpful. Working with groups like that would be good.
- Cultivate the best we can in our own personal selves. The Thursday Heartfulness contemplative group here helps. Put on our own oxygen masks first. Be present for our neighbors, lots of tiny ripples all together make big ripples.
- Focusing, narrowing, starting small, feeling good, win a battle, educate ourselves in the church community. Plastic bags as a potential issue, stop using them at church; or a compost project, something like that that people participate in—we succeed, then we take a bigger bite.
- Individually, we have to, we, every single one of us, model this example of the golden rule. Live it and share it with your neighbors. Be that light and love, be that person, model the golden rule. We can grow in numbers and shine our light. Not easy, but there's 20 of us here, we can do it! People are afraid to be a force. Are you willing to lay down your life? No! What is it we are all willing to do to help shine the light of love? We are the answer, and we need more people.
- This process has been very meaningful, alongside the worship service. In some churches the service is it.
- I have a very personal thought of how deeply I cherish being in this community. I experience it with the Heartfulness contemplative practice and with this group. I am a follower, not a leader, I can't take the initiative now but I am committed to participating. I deeply value the life and joy and light that you all give me.
- Spiritual communities need to articulate the vision that their tradition offers of the world living by the Golden Rule and ethic of love. We can work together with other traditions to advocate for a global ethic that we call all nations to follow. We can take bold actions that protest what is wrong or model and work toward the ideal we envision and proclaim. Actions and an articulated vision work together to help change consciousness. We can work to make our local communities operate by the love of neighbor ethic, helping them be more resilient and sustainable, building God's

realm here. We can offer training in communication skills and host circles like this to discuss difficult or important issues.

- I am new to going to church but I think we could make our representing this congregation part of how we act at town meeting or all meetings we go to. We could identify ourselves as doing this work as part of our church. This may be uncomfortable because churches haven't always acted in line with the golden rule and don't have a great reputation, but it could open dialogue in the same way a sign out front could.
- These issues are overwhelming. I don't know how to start without starting with myself and how I'm interacting with people. I try to stay calm and centered and be respectful.
- The denominations have very skilled staff and good programs and have put work into thinking through how we can have an impact in the world. We can speak up for a different kind of Christianity, making sure it is represented in public. We can study the Jim Antal book, learning what a church can do in the face of these problems. We want to have an impact in our lives and in our community AND look at what the national UCC and the ABC are doing. It is important to have a structure in our congregation to do this work in an ongoing way. We don't need a big group like this all the time but keep it (the bigger group) involved, keep the larger group experience and feeling and involvement.

Question 2: This series of congregational meetings is leading up to the question of how specifically “We intend to be a force, not merely a presence, effecting positive social change for peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.” The process we go through to answer that question each time a suggestion is made is as important as the results. What hopes or concerns do you have for our process of deciding specific ways in which this congregation will try to effect positive social change?

- In planning these meetings I've learned more about the Mission Committee. How do we compliment or combine with it, and not eclipse the tasks and processes of that group? I hope the Ad Hoc committee takes some ongoing form, complementary to the groups the church already has. Many of this group (today's group) are relative new comers, it is also important to work with those who were caretakers of the church that got it through some challenging times.
- We need something that allows us to deal with things quickly but also includes the community. The best decisions and levels of commitment come when everyone feels invested. You want questions to be asked. We need a structure to invite people to talk about suggestions for action in an open nonjudgmental space and also to get things done.
- The Deacons and Tom are planning to hold trainings on how to talk together in better ways about difficult issues.
- I hope the structure is fluid, flexible, never stagnant, and works in conjunction with the Mission Committee and all the other committees and boards, an interdisciplinary group with people coming in and out according to their interest, having big or small groups as needed. I never have been on a committee like that before but I have faith that we'll figure it out.
- Something like the Ad Hoc Fulfilling Our Vision Committee could be very powerful in taking a proposal and coming to a decision about how best to work it through the congregation. Part of the process is education, including outreach and listening circles like this. Anytime we're bringing up an issue, ask who would it benefit and why, and who would it harm and how? By definition we have a preferential concern for the disenfranchised because they need their voices lifted up. We need to hear their voices louder than most of our own. That's where the real listening needs to be, to the disenfranchised.
- This church has been good at listening and seeking out people and inviting them to be part of the process. We have lots of thoughtful actions to get to the next right thing. I trust in that process. The church doesn't rush to decisions.

- I am very happy no one has suggested that this process be assigned to the ossified old committees. We need a new entity in our church structure to do this work. Also, it would be interesting if we had a mechanism to get in touch with the UU and the Catholics when we are starting to engage with an issue – act as the spiritual community of Strafford and not just our church. Also, it would be great to involve children, teens and young adults.
- The process needs to be careful yet expeditious, able to move quickly into a process of study and decision, allowing time for education and deliberation and for all to be heard and yet moving as quickly as possible to action. (Of course, education is a significant action on its own, so even the first step in the process could be transformative.)
- Why don't politicians like to take stands on issues? Because taking a stand divides their constituents. My concern is that I have seen the congregation growing. I could imagine someone saying spirituality is very personal and as soon as we become activists, it may splinter such people off from the congregation. I would hate to see the congregation shrink in size but that's not an excuse for inaction.
- It would be great to have a protocol with clearly stated steps, including questions we ask as we consider a suggestion. We should be curious to explore all perspectives and aspects. We could have a poster in the Parish Hall presenting the steps of the protocol we go through for each suggestion.
- I am pretty new here, I don't know what the Mission Committee does or how other committees work. Make this process so everyone knows about it. The idea of alienating some people with this idea of being a force—it is an opportunity to reach out and engage at the individual level. I'd be happy to be one of the people doing that outreach.
- I am a little confused. I haven't been to the prior meetings. I thought we had a process – bring everything to the Church Council.
- I would like clarification of the process.
- I feel stymied. I am not sure to what end we are discussing the importance of the golden rule. Last time we talked more about what we could do to act as a beacon, to rally people. In my head I have been focusing on the environment. Golden rule is a personal rule of behavior. It is confusing to talk about it when we are here to decide how we will act as a force.
- I am taking the last few comments as clarifying questions, so let me clarify. Christa's suggestion that we fly a Black Lives Matter flag in September made clear that we didn't have a process designed to handle this in a way that would meet the goals we've expressed here today. We need to invent a new way to move forward as a congregation because we have this new Future Directions Vision statement that we unanimously adopted that calls us to be a force, not merely a presence. We have a history of bold actions but the process that led up to them has not always met the goals of careful and inclusive deliberation. This process we are in now is partly to prepare us to think carefully about what actions we could take and feel called to take—that is why we are talking about the Golden Rule in relation to all these issues, to put our decision in context so what we decide to do is the wisest use of our limited resources. The other purpose of what we are doing is to inform ourselves about the right kind of process to set up for the future. The Ad Hoc committee will take what they've heard and in conjunction with the Church Council come up with a process to try.
- Christa's question (about having a Black Lives Matter sign/banner) is something the congregation would need to endorse. Historically, the Council did decide things but the “force not merely a presence” part of the Future Directions statement is a different kind of thing that needs a new process.
- A few years ago, the church developed a process for taking matters to the council. This was a Big step forward. This new question is beyond the scope of that and an additional process is needed.

- Clarifying question: Does it involve the full congregation because it has to do with the vision statement—does everything in the statement need to go to the full congregation, whereas other things the Council handles?
- Reply: The Future Directions vision statement is new—this is the first part of it we have considered, so we can't really answer that question. So far, everything else has been working well through our existing system.
- The Deacons, and Mission Committee are two social outreach committees that are working well. Being good Christians.
- Technically, according to the By-laws, the Deacons are responsible for the mission of the church in local and worldwide concerns and the Mission Committee is one of three standing committees that exist to support the Deacons in their work (the other two being Hospitality and Religious Education). The Mission Committee is responsible for leading the congregation in its involvement in addressing global, national and local issues.
- Our next meeting will be after worship on Sunday, March 10th. It will address the final question: "How specifically do you see us 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 apologize if the format of this meeting has been frustrating to you—it has tremendous benefits, but it does not allow for debate or exploring some kinds of questions. Please email any unanswered questions to Tom or speak with him.
- This was an extraordinary meeting. The wisdom around this circle, the voice of the Spirit speaking through us, was amazing, wasn't it? Thank you each so much—everyone here contributed in an important and meaningful way. Thank you!