

Pastor's Report 2019

We heard a story last September at Annual Meeting that turned out to be the first step on a path we followed all year. One of us had invited an African-American friend to the Tunbridge World's Fair, but she declined to go because of the racism she and others had experienced there. This story led to the suggestion that we put a Black Lives Matter sign in front of the church.

We decided to wait to consider that proposal because we were about to conclude the year-long process of developing our Future Directions Vision, and deliberation about a sign in front of the church would then be better informed.

The congregation voted unanimously to adopt the Future Directions Vision at the end of October (see both versions at the end of this report). It included the sentence, “We intend to be a force, not just a presence, responding to wrongs, threats and destructive forces in the world and effecting positive social change, connecting religion to issues of peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.”

We knew then that a sign saying “Black Lives Matter” would be consistent with our Future Direction Vision, but we wanted to be as careful discerning how to move forward as we had been developing the Vision itself. We came up with a few questions we felt we needed to explore: “What does the world need us to do and what do we feel the Spirit calling us to do as a congregation? What would it look like if the Golden Rule and love of neighbor shaped all personal and global relationships and policies, and how can we help make that happen? How can we help bring about the change of consciousness in our culture that will make possible the changes to humanity’s way of living that the world needs?”

The Church Council established an Ad Hoc Fulfilling Our Vision committee to guide a series of conversations to explore those questions. The series began in mid-November and lasted until mid-March. We used a format similar to Restorative Justice circles designed to allow everyone equal opportunity to share their perspective and be listened to with care and respect. Along the way we looked at how the universal ethic of the Golden Rule applied to: Climate Change and Environmental Degradation; Economic Inequity and Poverty; Racism and Bigotry; Refugees and Immigration; and Injustice, Inequality or Abuse Related to Gender or Sexuality (including Women and L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ People). We filled posters covering the Parish Hall walls with our responses. (Transcriptions and notes from the entire process are on our website.)

The Ad Hoc Committee then led us to consider what we could do as a congregation to help our society change its policies and culture so that it would reflect the Golden Rule and ethic of love in all these areas, and what specifically we felt we needed to do right now.

After several meetings the churchwide process reached consensus on two immediate projects and established a standing Fulfilling Our Vision Committee that would oversee the projects and consider future ones. The immediate projects were 1. to focus on Climate Change first, studying Jim Antal’s book *Climate Church, Climate World*; and 2. to build a permanent sign in front of the church that could have rotating content (including “Black Lives Matter”) and to look into creating a banner to hang on the church. The climate book group met in June and July with over

20 people, including several from the UU and other congregations. A sign subcommittee hopes to complete construction before the 2019 Annual Meeting.

In a similar spirit, we celebrated a William Sloane Coffin Weekend of Events on March 22nd-24th to keep his legacy alive. We began with a Bach piano concert on Friday night by Annemieke McLane, followed on Saturday by the Rev. Jim Antal giving the William Sloane Coffin Address. We invited pastors and lay leaders from UCC churches in Thetford, Norwich, Hanover and Meriden to meet with leaders from our congregation and Jim Antal in a roundtable conversation Saturday afternoon. That evening we showed the documentary *William Sloane Coffin: An American Prophet*. Sunday morning we held a community service co-officiated by the Unitarian Universalist congregation's pastor, the Rev. Telos Whitfield, our former pastor the Rev. Mary Thompson and poet Jim Schley, with Bill Coffin preaching a sermon "From the Piano Bench" recorded when he was the senior pastor of Riverside Church in New York City. The last event of the weekend was a circle conversation on "What would Bill do in our day? What does his spirit call us to do?" The events were all well attended—the sanctuary was almost full for the Saturday Address and the Sunday worship thanks to extensive publicity and news articles. Jim Antal's talk can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sxGeSIQMOi0&t=366s>.

We launched a Stereotype Project the same weekend, created by 8th Grader Charlotte Reimanis. We wrote on a poster groups of people that are stereotyped and how it happens. The children discussed stereotypes and the Golden Rule with Joey Hawkins and Danette Harris over a few weeks of Religious Exploration. Six weeks later we explored what we had learned and we expressed deep appreciation to Charlotte during our May 5th service.

Joey and Danette also helped the children prepare for and hold a Hunger Banquet that was featured on the front page of the Valley News in November. It was well attended by children and adults who found it both educational and moving.

The Lord's Acre in the fall featured a play based on E. B. White's book, *Charlotte's Web*, written by Joey Hawkins and co-directed by Joey and Annemieke. The children rehearsed and discussed it during their Religious Exploration time on Sunday mornings and were joined with adult cast members for the outstanding production. The feast was fabulous thanks to Ed Eastman, Danette Harris and a cast of dozens!

We have been extremely well served over the years by our Investment Committee of Ken Bushnell, John Hawkins and Kevin Plunkett. They voted at their July 4th meeting to "Restructure the portfolio to eliminate fossil fuel holdings."

Our Mission Committee continues to help us make contributions to people suffering from hardship, injustice or violence. They hosted a Restorative Justice Sunday in support of the Hartford Community Restorative Justice Center, and they collected offerings for Church World Service to help with climate-related hurricanes and wildfires as well as other disaster relief. They collected food for local families in need and supported the Health Hub clinic at Newton School, among many other causes.

The Deacons Fund and Deacons also supported local families in need.

The annual rummage sale is another way we help in the community. The money raised is substantial and the volunteer hours are countless!

We have only two Trustees, Bill Burden and John Echeverria, assisted by Treasurer Kerry Claffey and Sexton Jack Welsh and other volunteers. Together they do a huge, invaluable job of keeping our finances and facilities in good shape—no easy task as the old church and parsonage buildings require constant attention.

Last but by far not least, the church continues to have a vibrant spiritual life at its core. Annemieke McLane provides beauty and spiritual depth through her playing piano and organ and directing the choir and by offering concerts and workshops, all augmented by occasional guest musicians. Annemieke again wrote and co-directed a Christmas pageant that brought a fresh, light-filled perspective to the nativity story. We had many rich services—the community Thanksgiving; the Advent rituals; a packed Christmas Eve observing the anniversaries of “Silent Night” and “O Little Town of Bethlehem;” a joint Easter Sunrise service on Gove Hill (and great pancake feast put on by Becky Bailey and Jim Schley) and 10:00 AM Easter service where Nicole Johnson got off a flight from California and stepped in on very short notice to stand in for Annemieke who had pneumonia. Flautist Laila Reimanis and piper Timothy Cummings added to the Easter exuberance while Danette led the children through the stations of Holy Week. Gus Speth spoke about the children’s climate lawsuit during worship in December, a dozen people attended the silent Ash Wednesday circle, we had a full house at the Maundy Thursday Last Supper Seder Dinner Theater, and Meg Albee read her poem, “Working from The Ovaries Out,” on Good Shepherd and Mothers Day Sunday.

We were blessed with outstanding guest preachers, including Joey Hawkins and Rev. Deadra Ashton from our congregation and neighbor Mark Kutowolski. Mark co-led the Heartfulness Contemplative Training Circle and offered two rich workshops during Lent on Centering Prayer and the contemplative path. Many of us read and discussed Martin Smith’s classic collection of daily Lenten meditations, *A Season for the Spirit*. My brother George joined me in a dialogue sermon one Sunday in April and he led over twenty people in a conversation after worship based on his book *A Golden Civilization and the Map of Mindfulness*.

Someone observed recently that this congregation has a big agenda for a small group. If you have read this far you can see why he said it, but we are in good company. Jesus and twelve followers founded a movement to change human consciousness and establish the realm of God’s compassion, justice and oneness on earth. The thing that makes our time unique is that we face the greatest threat to the survival of life on earth that any human generation has ever confronted. The urgency for Christ’s movement to succeed has never been greater, and it rests on us. So yes, we have a big agenda. The good news is that we also have the same Holy Spirit that filled Jesus and grew his movement from twelve to two billion over two thousand years.

I look forward to another year together with you on the way of Christ. Thank you!!!

Grace and peace and lots of hope,
Pastor Tom Kinder

Future Directions Vision
Adopted October 28, 2018

The United Church of Strafford aspires to be a welcoming congregation of open doors, hearts and minds, accepting our imperfections, embracing our differences and other cultures and traditions, and maintaining freedom to choose beliefs as individuals while living up to the name United Church. We want to be a place of faithful Christ-like love to which anyone who needs spiritual, personal or material support can turn, a beloved community connecting deeply and sharing honestly our joys and concerns, honoring and celebrating the experience of our elders and helping to raise the children of the town, a warm nest for us to land in when we are new to the church that becomes in time our spiritual home and extended family.

We want to be a congregation that has vital involvement in everyday life in the community and that reaches out to help those in need. We intend to be a force, not just a presence, responding to wrongs, threats and destructive forces in the world and effecting positive social change, connecting religion to issues of peace, justice and the care of God's creation.

We want this congregation to be a sanctuary in the midst of a complex world where we come to be renewed to go out and serve again. We need it to be a place of inspiration and wisdom, with worship services that allow us to connect to our better selves and reflect on a deeper meaning in life, enriched by beautiful words and music, by traditional scriptures, rituals and church seasons, by other religious perspectives and by contemporary voices that help us find new ways of speaking about God and the spiritual realm. We want to offer training in contemplative practice and cultivate a way of seeing the world and our lives as sacred. We want to be a center for questioning and discussing, learning and growing. We hope to consider seemingly insurmountable world problems and find a ladder of faith, hope and love to climb out into thought and action, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

We want to create a safe forum where we can consider big questions and controversial issues, sharing with healthy communication, where we can disagree and still get along, listening humbly, openly and with fairness and compassion to others with differing views.

We rely on the dedication and generous gifts of our congregational leaders and volunteers. We value traditions and also embrace evolution when change is necessary. We understand that to serve younger generations we need to find new ways of being a church that work for them. We want to help parents see that their children can benefit from what church uniquely offers and to have children involved in every aspect of church life.

We appreciate the old feeling and simplicity of the spirit-filled place in which we worship. It was built with love and we want to continue to love and care for it. We also appreciate the beauty of what takes place within it—worship and the music in worship and concerts that is so important to us and all our acts of creativity, compassion and love.

Future Directions Vision As a Unison Reading

The United Church of Strafford aspires
to be a community of open hearts and minds
embracing differences and diverse traditions,
extending faithful Christ-like love and support to all,
reaching out especially to those in need.

We intend to be a force, not merely a presence,
effecting positive social change
for peace, justice and the care of God's creation.

We come to this sanctuary to be renewed to serve,
finding inspiration and wisdom
in traditional words and music
and in new insights and expressions.

We want to learn and grow.

We want to provide training in contemplative practice
and to experience our lives and the world as sacred.

We hope to address big questions and controversial issues
openly and humbly, respectful of varied views and feelings.

We want children to be involved in every aspect of church life.

We seek ways to serve the changing needs of each generation.

We appreciate the beauty of this building
and what takes place within it
as we celebrate and follow the way of Christ
with Spirit-filled acts
of creativity, compassion and love.

Adopted October 28, 2018