

Recommendations from the Faithful Future
Discernment Process for a Strategic Plan
for United Church of Chapel Hill

Submitted to and Approved by Church Council
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As Amended and Approved by Congregation of United
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Executive Summary

The Church Council appointed the Faithful Future team in the spring of 2016 to guide United Church congregation through a year of discernment that was expected to result in a 3-5 year strategic plan. Within a few months of starting this process, the Edens announced their plans to retire in July 2017. The team adjusted their activities and planned deliverables to better support the pastor search process and recognizes that details of a full strategic plan will be delayed until after the arrival of a new Senior Pastor.

Over the past nine months, the Faithful Future team, UCCH staff and lay leaders, and the broader UCCH family have been asked to reflect prayerfully on “Who are we? Who do we serve? What do we want to be?”. This discernment process (described in detail in the Addendum) has included a careful analysis of internal church data and local demographic trends, a church-wide online survey (completed by 406 UCCH-ers), twelve “Listening Sessions” involving 170+ participants, and a 1.5 day Leadership Retreat with 65 UCCH lay leaders and staff.

A word of caution: it may be tempting to think of “strategic initiatives” as “our main focus over the next 3-5 years,” but this approach would diminish part of the important and unique character of our congregation. **It is critical that our strategic plan incorporate our core values and the strengths that we actively will seek to preserve, along with heightened focus and activity in new initiatives.** We encourage readers of this report to recognize the importance of all three of these components and consider how they reinforce each other:

Core Values of UCCH

- Intentionally Inclusive
- Moral Courage to Do
- Meaningful and Varied Expressions of Worship
- Supporting Faith Formation

Strengths to Preserve

- Progressive Theology
- Social Justice, Environmental Justice, and Community Outreach
- Extravagant Welcome
- Education Program
- Excellence in Worship

Initiatives to Accelerate

- Becoming a Beloved and Just Community
- Building Deeper Connections

When Church Council and the congregation approve this report, we anticipate that it will inform the Senior Pastor search process, near-term resources and program planning during the transition to a new Senior Pastor, and a fully formed 3-5 year strategic plan and action plan within 6 months of the arrival of a new Senior Pastor.

Core Values of United Church of Chapel Hill

Intentionally Inclusive - We are a people of God's extravagant, radical welcome: opening our doors to all, valuing diversity, and inviting individuals to be themselves among us. We're not just making room for you – we believe that you belong here as much as anyone else belongs here. We pledge to one another a willingness for dialogue and, when necessary, change, so that all feel included in this community, creating a feeling of belonging, and caring for each other in times of celebration and in times of need and crisis.

Moral Courage to Do - We strive to live the UCC motto "To Believe is to Care, to Care is to Do", actively encouraging and challenging ourselves and each other to seek more and better ways to build God's Reign here on earth, by seeking social, racial, economic, and environmental justice, especially for the voiceless and the most vulnerable.

Meaningful and Varied Expressions of Worship - We love good, deep, joyous, inspirational, and challenging worship based on scripture, taken seriously, not literally. We embrace many creative and moving expressions of worship, in music, art, and word.

Supporting Faith Formation - We see faith as a journey that doesn't end but always needs nurturing to hear a God that is still speaking. Stimulating spiritual growth among individuals and our faith community, regardless of age, through multiple pathways that touch our souls, our hearts, our minds, is a joy and a priority.

Strengths of United Church of Chapel Hill

Just as new strategic initiatives can move UCCH forward, continued development of our existing gifts and strengths is equally important. Of the strengths identified throughout the entire process, those most commonly referenced include (in no particular order):

Progressive Theology - UCCH is committed to prophetic justice and to full equality, based on the conviction that all persons are beloved children of God. We seek to be a community of faithfulness to Jesus' vision of love, unity, compassion and service to all, especially to those in need. We see the Bible as the Word of God, not the words of God. Thus, we relish our teaching, preaching and faith formation as they open for us the Way of Jesus, the Living Word. We embrace our responsibility "to make this faith our own in reality of worship, in honesty of thought and expression, and in purity of heart before God," (Preamble to the UCC Constitution). UCCH cherishes the whole of God's creation and its delicate ecological order and is deeply committed to defending and preserving it.

Social Justice, Environmental Justice, and Community Outreach - Our congregation has a long-standing tradition of reaching beyond our church walls to join and encourage others to serve the most needy and marginalized in the community around us, the wider world, and the entire community of life. We are willing to take on tough issues by educating ourselves, engaging in challenging conversations with each other, and taking concrete action God calls us

to take. We will continue to advocate for selected causes that we have prioritized through discernment and will continue to influence our community, our state, and our nation to follow.

Extravagant Welcome - Most of us were first attracted to UCCH by the warm welcome that we received and that sense of welcoming and inclusive community continues to be what keeps many of us here. We will continue to nurture intentional community by supporting fellowship opportunities, care groups, and opportunities to interact one-on-one, especially with those we are least likely to meet in our daily lives, and in small groups.

Educational Program - We are a congregation of life-long learners. We will continue to engage and inform each other through excellent children, youth, young adult, and adult programs that vary in content, format, and scope. Our educational programs (including children and youth, social justice, and music) have been and will continue to be key to our efforts to foster engagement at every age, and the widening expression that diversity within our congregation demands.

Excellence in Worship - We value the inspired preaching of our senior and associate ministers, the diverse music styles and formats offered by a wide range of volunteer musicians (including traditional, classical, gospel, folk, and instrumental). We will maintain our efforts to provide accessible worship for a wide community of believers with different needs, including Spanish-based bilingual worship, Children's Church, Youth Church, and meditative formats, such as Taize.

Recommended Initiatives to Accelerate

UCCH is a strong, vibrant congregation. The Faithful Future strategic planning process was undertaken not as reaction to any problems, but from a desire to better focus the gifts of our energy toward our common goals. The following initiatives and subsequent action steps were informed and driven by feedback received during the Leadership Summit, Church Survey, and Appreciative Inquiry Listening Sessions. We are not bound or limited by the action steps, may not complete all of them, or may find that alternative actions will better move the congregation forward.

Becoming a Beloved and Just Community – Achieving the diversity we seek will require living intentionally and bearing witness to God's larger calling to justice and reconciliation. We seek both to practice and to proclaim our historic efforts of extravagant welcome and commitment to racial justice such that our practice of inclusivity will achieve a more diverse congregation and our witness will exhibit "*courage in the struggle for justice and peace*" (UCC Statement of Faith).

This effort will require continued discernment in the practice of inclusivity, but if we are to live into the vision of the church as seen by John "*from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*" (Revelation 7:9), some key aspects may include:

- Experimenting more with multilingual and multicultural worship styles and format.

- Integrating, but not assimilating, the Karen- and Spanish-speaking segments of the congregation: worship, fellowship, and service experiences are broadened and enriched by these traditions.
- Developing and funding the programs, staff, and other supports needed to fulfill our core value of intentional inclusion and becoming a broader multiracial congregation.

This effort will require continued discernment in the struggle for justice and peace for which courage in every generation is required, but if we are to fulfill the call of Isaiah and then of Jesus *"to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of God's favor"* (Isaiah 61, Luke 4) some key aspects may include:

- Providing courageous, risk-taking witness for justice in the larger world.
- Living church outside its walls, including hosting events outside of our campus/property that draw the broader community around us and a national community of believers.
- Bridge-building to create a constellation of different faith communities or partners beyond faith communities who are supportive of one another (in programs, community service, education) and to increase the diversity of our experience.

Building Deeper Connections - As we increase in diversity and possibly in numbers, we actively and intentionally will foster efforts to enhance a sense of community. Recognizing that building intimate connections in a large congregation requires interacting one-on-one and in small groups, we are willing to explore and experiment with ways that put each of us in meaningful contact with those who are not the same but in faith:

- Offering different types of small groups in different formats (Bible studies, worship groups, education programs) and locations (at church and satellite locations).
- Providing physical and temporal spaces for fellowship and for telling our stories, and expanding our experience with appreciative inquiry.
- Using technology to become a 24/7 church: connecting us throughout the week and from different locations so that we can be there, when needed, for each other.

Next Steps

We recognize that much of the congregation's energy over the next 6-12 months will be devoted to the Sr. Pastor Search and transition process. Once Church Council and the congregation approve this report, we anticipate that it will inform the Senior Pastor Search process and near-term resources and program planning during the transition to a new Senior Pastor. Fully developing the details of a 3-5 year strategic plan (including budgets, dates, and program and staffing commitments) will be postponed until the new Sr. Pastor can fully participate in the process.

Addendum – Description and History of the Strategic Planning Process

Initial Steps

In 2015, Susan Beaumont and Associates, a consulting group from Troy, Michigan, with expertise in large-church congregational growth, dynamics, and planning, completed a study for United Church of Chapel Hill that identified processes, governance, and other issues that needed to be updated in light of the growth of the congregation over the past 15 years. Following Susan's recommendations, in the spring of 2015 the Church Council appointed a committee to update our Constitution, By-Laws, Personnel Policy, and other documents and to ensure we were consistent throughout our documents.

In February 2016, the Church Council voted to initiate a strategic planning process, which also had been recommended in the 2015 study. Susan was asked to continue her work with United Church to help guide the strategic planning process. In April 2016, a second committee, which came to be known as the "Faithful Future Team", was established to facilitate the discernment of our church's priorities for the next five to ten years. The committee was commissioned by the congregation to proceed in this work during the service on June 5, 2016.

Internal Committee Work

To prepare to lead this discernment process, the committee participated in an initial visioning and planning session and began to study the book *Holy Conversations* by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann. The initial members of the Faithful Future Team were Dianne Bertsch, Alecia Brower, Rick Edens, Matt Fitzpatrick, Jody Forehand, Megan Hughes, Lee Storrow, and Doug Zabor. (Alecia stepped off the committee in July 2016 to become Assistant Moderator and was replaced, for a short time, by Jeff Hall.) Other staff and members of the congregation provided research and logistical support to the committee.

Beginning in the spring and continuing through the fall we gathered internal and external demographic data from our church-maintained statistics sources, census data, and interviews with city and school officials. We also spent many hours distilling a set of questions initially provided by church council into what would become a small set of "driving questions" that would guide our inquiry.

During the summer of 2016, the Faithful Future Team also created a circular logo based on the stained glass window on the back wall of the sanctuary. Jeff Hall wrote a four-point guiding framework (with a nod to the four points on a navigational compass) for the logo: Focus on the Future, Fidelity with the Past, Feasibility of our Goals, and Feedback from All. As the process evolved, the Faithful Future Team recognized that the many pieces of the strategic planning process were somewhat confusing to the congregation. To address this, the team created a visual timeline on a large bulletin board as a way to show how each activity flowed into the next.

In Fall 2016, we concentrated on looking at membership trends using church data sources to analyze church and Sunday School attendance (adults and children), music program attendance, and giving trends. A map of church membership was created in September 2016.

Engaging the Congregation

Three information gathering techniques were used to solicit feedback from the congregation and to engage members and friends in the discernment process: Listening Circles, an online Survey, and the Leadership Summit.

Listening Circles -- On September 18, 25 United Church members and friends participated in an Appreciative Inquiry Listening Session Facilitator Training led by Susan Beaumont. Once trained, these facilitators conducted 12 listening circles with a total of 175 participants throughout the month of October. The listening circles were 2-hour guided conversations between two participants (who later joined other pairs to continue the sharing) and designed to give participants a place to share the stories of why they are involved with UCCH and to reflect upon their hopes and dreams for the congregation. Special listening circles were also held with church youth, members of the congregation who are Karen, and members of the congregation who are Spanish-speaking. A separate listening circle was held for staff on September 19 and facilitated by Susan Beaumont.

Survey -- In late October and early November, we launched an online survey that was completed by 406 members and friends (approximately 40% of our members). The survey provided important demographic information as well as some indicators of what qualities were most important to participants in terms of worship style, church activities, and pastors.

Leadership Summit -- On December 2 and 3, 65 UCCH leaders participated in a Leadership Summit facilitated by Susan Beaumont. All boards were invited to attend as well as the Faithful Future Team, pastors, staff, past moderators, and committee representatives. At this 1 ½ day summit, church leaders were presented with a summary of information gathered throughout the process, including the listening circles and survey. We were also guided through a process to create a symbolic timeline of church history and discussed our individual and collective ideas about the core values of the church, the things we hope to maintain in the future, and new or improved directions. Over the course of the retreat, these leaders, clergy, and staff collectively claimed the congregation's values and strengths, and through prayerful discernment, identified possible strategic initiatives.

On December 11, the Faithful Future Team presented a summary of the gathered information at the Adult Forum. An additional presentation was planned for January 8, but will be rescheduled, due to snow.

Synthesizing and Discernment

In late December and January, the Faithful Future Team, along with some volunteers from the congregation, collated and synthesized the discussions and discernment from the Leadership Summit. The Faithful Future Team developed this report for Council to document the themes that clearly and strongly presented themselves during the Leadership Summit. These themes also were reflected in the survey and listening circles.