

JUST. ONE. CHURCH.

A 5-Year Vision for Ministry at United Church of Chapel Hill
Rev. Cameron Barr

Introduction

We have much to celebrate. After 38 years of ministry with Jill and Rick Edens, God has led us through a time of pastoral transition. That transition included departures, arrivals, and role changes. It also involved governance changes and a shift from a co-pastor model of ministry toward a Senior Pastor model. While still vibrant, we are a different church than we once were. Pastoral and staff leadership is different. We have been building stronger processes for congregational engagement, collaboration, and governance. Our collective project to build a sustainable ministry with the Latinx community is more promising than ever. Additionally, our social justice commitments have grown into sustained witness in the areas of racial equity, immigration, human sexuality, and the environment. There are many things to celebrate, but God is calling us to move faithfully forward into a bright future.

A vision we share is to spend the next five years growing as Just One Church. That means that we will be focused on integrating our systems for worship, programming, and staffing so that we will have a strong shared identity as one congregation and so that our justice commitments pervade our core ministries. By 2025, we will have matured into a collaborative model of governance, seen growth in all of our worship services, cultivated robust financial support for our ministries, and proclaimed the Gospel boldly throughout the Triangle region. We will be known as a growing, caring, justice-seeking church.

Looking forward

The critical work before us now is to leverage our historical accomplishments by focusing on integration and maturation. Integration is about building a shared identity and incorporating our justice calling more deeply into our common life. Maturation is about growing spiritually and operationally into the new model of ministry that we have adopted. As with any human body, growth in the Body of Christ takes time and patience—and a lot of practice.

Our congregation experienced astounding growth in the first decade of this century. Life at United Church is exciting, but increasingly busy—if not hectic. We developed many organic projects and initiatives that now sometimes compete with one another. Some note that in our justice calling and social ambitions we can at times feel disconnected from the heart of the Gospel that undergirds this prophetic work. It's important, therefore, to be ever-mindful of God's grace, stay centered in worship, and listen in the silence of our hearts for Christ's call. There is a need for simplicity and groundedness in our common life. "Be still and know that I am God," the Psalmist says.

In other words, though we have many aspirations, passions, and commitments, we are still...just a church.

Returning to simplicity gives us an opportunity to rediscover the radical and subversive purpose for which Christ calls us together. To be “just a church” involves some wordplay on our vocation to seek justice. In one sense, to be socially just is to follow Jesus toward God’s reign of righteousness and equity. Social justice is in our congregation’s DNA. In another sense, the word *just* reminds us to be precisely and authentically a church. It is a high calling to worship God and not Empire. It is prophetic to proclaim liberation to all held captive by sin, evil, and death. It is grace-filled “to grow in love of God and neighbor” in a world that too often rewards selfish desires. That’s why it is essential for us to find a simple, deep, and challenging way of being together. We aren’t trying to be anything other than the church of Jesus Christ, but what a church that is! We are one church, united in vibrant and exciting ministries that give witness to the radical truth of God’s love.

Just – God calls us to seek justice.

At the heart of the Gospel is Jesus’s mission “to proclaim release to the captives and let the oppressed go free.” We have lived out this vocation of all Christians through sustained reflection on racial equity, outreach to our immigrant neighbors, reducing our carbon footprint, and our commitments to the LGBTQ community. In the days ahead, as we follow Jesus in solidarity with those who are oppressed, we will deepen our spiritual base and lead the pivot from simple acts of charity and benevolence toward confession, education, advocacy, and social action.

We are already known in Chapel Hill and surrounding areas as a leading social justice church. Five years from now, we will also be known for the richness of faith that undergirds everything we do. Our justice work will be the full expression of our life in Christ. Expressing our core value of the “Moral Courage to Do,” we will build a compelling identity as the “faith-in-action” church. We will nurture it in our discipleship program for youth and young adults, leveraging the ample resources of our dedicated boards to build dynamic and integrated Faith Formation programming on faith and social justice for all ages. In so doing, our offerings for youth will be recognized as the leading programs in the region, if not the entire state.

We will give witness to our values in the community through an exciting public identity campaign. Mirroring our sprawling membership, this campaign will be regional to the Triangle rather than local to the town of Chapel Hill. As part of that effort we will develop an inspiring website that projects our identity into the world and tells the story of our faith. In the next five years, our public witness will touch everyone from Mebane to Cary.

One – God calls us to the unity of Christ’s body.

Our tradition remembers the prayer of Jesus “that they may all be one.” The unifying work of God’s reconciling love is present in all that we do. The growth of La Mesa has made it a strong expression of the diversity in our midst. Our vision is that La Mesa will continue to flourish as an innovative worship ministry of United Church, which shares a single staff who are fully integrated into the life and service of the congregation. We will be a model of common vocation in ministry, and the community will see us as the rare Mainline Protestant congregation with a strong program of ministry with the Latinx community.

Although our several worship services have different characters, they all invite worshipers into a deeper relationship with God through the ministries of United Church of Chapel Hill. In all our worship services we will proclaim the Gospel with attention to our antiracism commitments, hospitality to immigrants and refugees, and a multicultural consciousness. We will be “one body with many members,” recognizing that only together do we make the Body of Christ.

Church – God calls us into the church.

We are a church at work in the world, a people who put faith-in-action (a just church), but we are still just a church: a place of worship, spiritual care, and loving hearts. I was moved by a comment from our recent congregational vision session: “United Church has helped me to live well again since my husband passed away.” There are many examples of our caring culture, but this one compellingly reveals how a community like ours can show the love of Christ to one another. Five years from now that experience of caring and compassion will be a hallmark of our life together.

To be a church is to be centered in worship. In 2025 people will be drawn to United Church not only by our social justice commitments but also by the vitality of our worship. We will be a church whose worship nourishes our witness through sustained excellence in preaching, a rich life of prayer, one of the strongest programs of music in our region and coordinated faith formation opportunities to complement our worship pattern.

We will know we are succeeding if worship is growing in attendance. Within five years, we will increase worship attendance by 30% to reach an average of 500 weekly worshipers.

To accomplish all this, we must generate the organizational, human and financial resources to make it happen. While remaining true to our exemplary commitments to the environment, inclusion, and accessibility, we will sustain and maximize our physical assets. We will become a model for collaborative and accessible governance. We will also ensure that our staff and programs have sufficient resources to achieve new levels of ministry. This means that by 2025 we will have doubled our endowment and increased our annual giving by 30%.

Conclusion

I believe that God is calling us to faithfulness, unity, and simplicity. Our justice values are central to our identity. But if we are to be a socially just church—not simply a church with a social justice program—our values will need to be grounded in a life of faith that is fed by a vital spiritual life of worship. In combination there is little we can't accomplish. We are on the threshold of a promising new chapter in the life of this exceptional church.

God is calling us to be church with each other and for each other. A church that seeks justice. A reconciling and unifying church. A growing community of worship, prayer, and care.

God calls us to be Just. One. Church.