

Background:

In 1620 the Pilgrims set out for their great adventure – to found a city where they might live as a people committed entirely to living according to God’s will. Before they left, their pastor, the Rev. John Robinson (who remained behind with those who would come later), preached a sermon that is still cited frequently today. His text? Ezra 8:21.

“Then I proclaimed a fast there, at the river Ahava, that we might humble ourselves before our God, to seek from God the right way for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions.”

As we contemplate what it means to be a faithful, vibrant and relevant house of worship, we would be wise to heed his advice – no less pertinent today than when first spoken, nearly 400 years ago:

“I am confident the Lord has more truth and light to break forth from His holy word. I bewail the state [...of] churches, who have come to a full-stop in religion, and will go no further than the instrument of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn beyond what Luther saw; the Calvinists, they stick where Calvin left them. This is a misery much to be lamented; for though they were shining lights in their times, yet God did not reveal His whole will unto them, and if they were alive today they would be as ready to and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received.”

The United Church of Christ takes from this text its motto, “God is still speaking.” Indeed, this is the central concept of Robinson’s sermon, the central belief of the Pilgrim’s quest, and the central tenant of our covenant with one another still today, stating as it does, “We claim as our mission the promotion of justice, human dignity and peace, and participation in meeting the unfolding needs of God's people. We bind ourselves to follow the leadings of God's spirit as God reveals them to us.”

Given this, it is only right and fitting that we, as a congregation, take seriously the call to watch for further light, and be wary of any desire we might have to rest on what God has already done in this place.

As pertinent as this call ever is in any congregation, there are two factors that heighten its urgency for First Church now. The first is the last decade of near-constant pastoral transition. With at least 8 pastors over 10 years, the need for a stabilizing and over-arching vision for leadership – both lay and ordained – is essential. The second factor is the changing economic landscape in Burlington generally, and First Church specifically. With the economic effects of the pandemic still unfolding, and the anticipated sale of the parsonage to the Ronald McDonald House, a solid understanding of our collective vision, and a strategic set of actionable core goals will be indispensable to living into our mission in the next decade and beyond.

Charge:

Given the above, the first and primary task of the Vision 2020 Task Force will be to guide First Church in the process of “[seeking] from God the right way for ourselves, our children, and all our possessions.” Together with the congregation, the Task Force will be charged with leading us in an assessment of congregational priorities and translating the results of those conversations into a set of actionable goals and Strategic Plan for First Church over the next decade.

- 1) With, and under the guidance of the Lead Pastor and staff, develop a process for creating an updated Vision and Strategic Plan for the First Congregational Church of Burlington, UCC. The plan should involve wide congregational input, including forums and discussion groups, and may include a strategic planning consultant.
- 2) Using the Trustees-approved plan, seek congregational input, and obtain information from and about the congregation on its composition, vision, and feelings about our mission and goals.
- 3) Obtain demographic information about the wider local community to help the Membership assess where FCCB may lead or serve the needs of the City.
- 4) Assimilate the information to identify trends, concepts, and common themes, and use this to draft, test, and refine a Vision Statement for the congregation.
- 5) Upon Trustees’ approval of the Vision Statement, draft a Strategic Plan that will powerfully advance the Mission of First Church.

The Task Force (TF) will be comprised of six-eight individuals, chosen by the Pastor and Trustees, with nominations from the Board of Deacons. At least one member of the TF will be a member of the Board of Trustees.

Given the sensitive and prayerful nature of the undertaking, the timeframe for this proposal will remain open, with an expected Strategic Vision in hand before the Spring of 2022, if not sooner. A member of the TF will gather with the Trustees to provide a progress report every month, beginning in October of 2020. An interim report including the progress to date as well as strategic vision-related 2022 budget requirements will be provided by the end of June, 2021.

The deliverable from the TF’s evaluative process will be a written, formal Strategic Plan that is able to clearly elucidate, based on their research, how they believe we are being called to live our faith.