

Discernment Team Recommendations, Nov. 12, 2022

We are making three basic recommendations to Consistory and the Congregation.

The first is about what we believe to be God's preferred intermediate-term vision for First United Church of Christ of Galion, Ohio. This Vision Statement would become our Congregation's narrowly focused, external ministry vision for the next half decade to a decade. This is the "What" question in our "Ministry Frame." This Vision Statement should become our primary, external, ministry focus. It should also be the central focus of the next, settled pastor's ministry: what we will want the next pastor to help us accomplish. We recommend its adoption.

The second is a statement of Core Values for our congregation. These are essentially the "Why" question in our "Ministry Frame." They also support the external ministry vision. These Core Values also include broadly focused, inclusive, internal "all" language. This is about whom we will fully welcome into membership and participation in our congregation and its ministry. These internal Core Values have some aspirational features. But they are also intended to be relatively non-negotiable and not just expressions of changeable personal or group preferences. They are intended to both explain who we uniquely are -- and who we shall become, with God's help. So these Core Values are more written in stone than in sand. We recommend their adoption.

(In this report, we are deliberately choosing not to address the "How" questions [strategy] or the "When" questions [measurable objectives] in our "Ministry Frame." We believe that defining strategy and measurable objectives for achieving this vision needs to be left for the next pastor.)

Third, we are making a recommendation about What Kind of Pastor we seek to call, this pastor's relationship with our congregation and whether this will be a full-time or part-time pastorate. This last recommendation also has implications for how we deploy our finite financial resources. This recommendation should also guide the work of a soon-to-be-formed Search Committee. We recommend its adoption.

Put together, these three recommendations boil down to thinking big about our future here as the Church of Jesus Christ. Of course, there are no guarantees with these sorts of recommendations. But we believe these recommendations would give us the best chances of not only surviving, but thriving as a congregation. And thinking small will have even more predictable results. We also believe this commitment to build God's Realm and to do the Work of Christ here -- as we best understand it -- has significant likelihood of fundamentally improving things for all of Galion. So we basically recommend striving first for God's Realm, doing the Work of Christ, and then trusting God Spirit to indeed meet many of our other basic needs. (See Matthew 6: 30-34.)

Vision Statement of First United Church of Christ:

Sharing our Lives and Blessings to Nurture and Grow With our Community

We will risk our resources -- while we still have reasonable room to maneuver -- to create a new, externally focused ministry, with our next pastor. This ministry will seek to successfully deploy our single biggest God-given resource as a congregation: We have lots of successful, reasonably well-off retirees, with significant life-skills, experience and community relationships.

The greatest unmet need in Galion seems to be with younger "mobile" singles and families. They are often just lost. These relatively un-rooted and vulnerable people are about 10 percent of the population. They are mostly in survival mode -- or are those who have been even more left behind economically, socially and educationally. Family relationships are often strained or

fractured. As parents, these people often set up their children for generational poverty and struggle.

So if members of our generation-give-back – successful retirees, in and out of our congregation - - could somehow be mobilized in the name of Jesus Christ to share their life experience and encouragement with generation left-behind, Galion could be fundamentally transformed for the better. We know that not everyone will want or accept encouragement or mentoring, but many of our neighbors will.

We should also not expect the next pastor to do this externally focused ministry alone, but to equip us in the congregation for the work of ministry. (See Ephesians 4: 11-13, especially in the NRSV and King James Version.)

Our vision statement also can be seen as a positive, Christian restatement of the final verses of the Old Testament. (See Malachi 4: 6.) This verse about turning the hearts of parents to their children sets up the Gospel of Jesus. This verse may also explain God's preferred intermediate vision for our next ministry, with our next pastor helping and equipping us for this, right now, in Galion.

Core Values of First United Church of Christ:

Serve the Public Good

Our primary ministry focus is to be outside our doors -- external rather than internal. Just as Jesus came not to be served but to serve, we will also want to serve our community. (See Mark 10: 41-45.) This is in contrast to just calculating what can be done to just sustain our internal programs for ourselves. We will want to make a difference with the big things. And we believe God wants to make a difference with the big things. We believe the Gospel deals with the big things. These are the big problems that frustrate our neighbors and that our community leaders really worry about. Serving the public good means doing ministry focused on the big stuff, in this community. This is where we believe Jesus is already at work and where he invites us to come along side and pitch in.

Praising God with Quality Worship

We place and will continue to place a high value on quality music and liturgy during our worship services. We will also use multiple broadcast methods, such as radio, streaming and publicity, to reach the broader community. This is not just entertainment for us. Instead, this is intended as praise and worship of God within and outside of our building.

Open Minds and Hearts

We value freedom of conscience and belief, within reasonable Christian behavioral guardrails. Members have the responsibility to interpret God's will and the Scriptures for ourselves, and to generously act upon their beliefs, with a central focus on Jesus Christ. We are also open to hear what God may still be speaking to the church. (See John 16: 12-14.) And we have a duty -- with high regard for truth and fairness -- to respect those within the faith community whose conclusions and faith expressions may differ from ours. We affirm openness and generosity of heart in the living of our lives and a willingness to extravagantly welcome to the church all whom God sends to us. We will seek to respect and bless all, and to disrespect and harm none.

‘All’ means ‘All,’ Regardless

Our doors are open to provide a safe, welcoming environment for all God’s children. We are agreeing not to discriminate, regardless of social pressure to do so.

Seeking the Truth, and Changing as a Result

We look at our early church history and acknowledge a time of injustice and exclusion. Today we witness similar problems. For an imperfect people, there is no end point or conclusion to such problems, but we resolve to continuously recognize, learn, share and act that God’s will be done.

What Kind of Pastor for First United Church of Christ?

The Discernment Team further recommends that First United Church of Christ seek to call a full-time, ‘agent-of -change pastor,’ as opposed a part-time, family-church pastor or a hospice pastor.

By recommending a full-time “agent-of-change pastor,” we accept and agree that the next pastorate will require congregational changes and adjustments – which are as-yet-undefined. But they will be significant and likely painful. We face difficult decisions. We can no longer pretend that deciding not to decide about change is not actually a choice, with consequences. Maintaining all present practices will just continue present downward numerical trends. Only changes and adjustments can be expected to increase our numbers back to those needed to sustain a pastor-size church. We accept and agree that calling a full-time pastor will require us, at least short-term, to draw upon congregational savings. We recommend against a part-time pastorate. We know that with average worship attendance now below 50 or 60, just settling in with a part-time pastor as a “family-size church” would probably cause even more painful changes. These will likely include loss of the building, which would probably be unsustainable for a “family-size church.” Music might also have to be scaled back in a “family-size church.” We also recommend against a third choice to passively accept a closing as inevitable and therefore to call a hospice pastor, who could administer any needed congregational narcotics and work toward a closure with as little pain as possible.

Congregational Profile Questions for Search Committee:

Also flowing from these Discernment Team recommendations will be answers, at least in rough form, to three basic questions that all congregations in search must answer: Who are we? Who is our neighbor? Who are we called to become?

Who are we? We are an aging congregation, with declining numbers. But many of our regular, worshipping, congregational members are successful and reasonably well-off retirees. They have significant life-skills and community relationships. They are at the stage of life where they often have – or potentially have -- a legacy orientation and want to give back to the community. Remarkably, the largest single demographic in Galion is made up of similarly well-off retirees, with this give-back potential. This successful “generativity” demographic represents 30 percent or more of the people within the Galion ZIP code. And the majority appear to be unchurched.

Who is our neighbor? The “neighbor” for whom we are recommending an external ministry focus is the next largest demographic within the Galion ZIP code: These are younger “mobile” singles and families. These relatively rootless and vulnerable people make up about 10 percent of the population. They are mostly in survival mode, or are those who have been left further behind by Galion’s new, post-industrial economy. They often lack the skills, supportive relationships and necessary encouragement to take advantage of the more complex economic and life opportunities that do exist in our region.

Who are we called to become? The Discernment Team believes we are being called to become the congregation that risks its resources and deploys the God-given strengths of the people God has given us, to serve the least, the last and the lost among our neighbors. In our next pastorate, we hope to mobilize members of our generation-give-back – the successful retirees, in and out of our congregation -- to share their life experience and encouragement with generation left-behind. We hope the results will be blessings for them, (and us too), all our children and our community.

Signed,

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