

People of the Fire: Growing in Faith

A DISCERNMENT PROCESS FOR FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Introduction:

First Christian Church gives thanks to God for blessings on its mission and ministry especially over the past eight years. Building on the “Following the Fire in the New Century” process we seek to enter anew into a time of reflection and conversation to discover how God is calling us and leading us into the future. This time of discernment and visioning is important and necessary at this time in our history for at least the following reasons:

Compelling Reasons for Discerning God’s Call at this time.

This is a partial list of opportunities and challenges identified by the Ministries Council and Vision Task Group on February 16, 2008.

1. FCC is a much different community of faith today than it was 10 years ago, in part because new people with new gifts have willingly entered into our lives. The Stewardship Ministry recently provided an opportunity for all of us to identify our individual spiritual gifts given to us by God. Now each of us must be compelled to continue that journey and discover how to intentionally, actively share those gifts with each other, and our community, in the hope of an even more vibrant Spirit-led common life.
2. All church related work has inherent challenges that must be overcome before that work comes to fullness. Those challenges may be a diverse neighborhood, physical building needs, or the challenge of an ever changing society where we find our church.

Over many years of ministry, we as a congregation have learned that by working through these challenges, and others, that we become better because of the process and true growth does occur. We know that through study, prayer, and honest open conversation - God will lead us, equip us, and ultimately empower us to become a better Christian community of Faith.

3. We must be a nurturing community where every individual can be enabled and empowered to more fully respond to God's call, and thereby grow in their faith, and mature in the Spirit.
4. The God with whom we worship, pray, and commune is a living God offering us an ever-flowing river of grace and love. We must each discover how to more fully respond to these gifts from God in a way that is also alive, full of hope, joy, and compassion for the spiritual well being of each other, and our community.
5. The church has a critical role in the formation of lives of people of all ages in the context of a secular culture that values personal independence, accumulation of wealth and power, and corrupting competition. The message of the church is that there is an alternative way to live in relationship with one another and with God. The challenge is to convey that message to all generations in a way that is heard and effective.
6. Discernment is an ongoing process of being in relationship with a living God. It is being open to God's mission and calling for First Christian Church. Discernment is not something we only have to do once, but rather it is process we are continually practicing. It is a way of life.

Goals for our Discernment Process:

The following goals will guide the Vision and Planning Process at First Christian Church:

1. Context: To recognize our own context as a missionary setting and thoroughly explore what that must mean for our own ministry and mission.
2. Vision: To prayerfully re-examine our shared vision to consider anew how God is calling us into the future.
3. Missional Strategy: To make key decisions about the Role and Mission, Key Result Areas and Goals, Participant groups, and Core Beliefs and Commitments that will provide direction for our church's future.
4. Ministry Plan: To design innovative plans that faithfully and responsively guide our congregation into vision-led ministry and mission over the next 5-10 years.
5. Spiritual Formation and Renewal: To become more centered in Christ and receptive to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, thus cultivating anew the spiritual energy of this congregational community.

6. Reflection: To provide opportunities, resources, and occasions for biblical study and reflection, with special concern for our understanding of and experience of church.
7. Alignment: To insure a reexamination of resources (leadership, finances, facilities), organizational structures and processes, ministries and programs, and to align these with the vision.
8. Communication: To inform and converse at an early stage and throughout the entire process with all leaders and members of the congregation.

Roles and Structures

In the *Discernment Process*, the following persons and groups will have important roles.

- a. Vision Task Group
- b. Conveners
- c. Pastors
- d. Ministries Council and Board
- e. The congregation
- f. Existing committees, ministry teams, and groups.
- g. Other groups will be convened to explore, analyze, and name the implications of profile data for the congregation.
 - (1) Discussion groups
 - (2) Conferences on the Present and Future
 - (3) Bible study groups
 - (4) Vision and Leadership Retreats

VISION TASK GROUP

a. Role and Mission.

The role and mission of the Vision Task Group is to design and manage a discernment process. This means guiding First Christian Church through a process in order to achieve the key result areas and goals established by the Ministries Council, and Board.

The Vision Task Group is not a decision-making team, but rather a coordinating team. It is responsible for guiding and directing a process in such a way that will ensure broad participation and enable the congregation and their leadership to make important decisions together in search of answers to the question, "What is God is calling us to be and do at this time in our life?"

b. Responsibilities.

The Vision Task Group is responsible for:

- (1) In collaboration with the Ministries Council, the Board, members of the congregation and a consultant from the Center for Parish Development, building a design for a Discernment process for First Christian Church.
- (2) Guiding the Congregation through a Discernment process, and monitoring and adjusting the process along the way to insure its success.
- (3) Assuring the development of a future orientation in the Congregation.
- (4) Interpreting the Discernment process to the leaders and members of the Congregation.
- (5) Reporting regularly to the Ministries Council and Board.
- (6) Providing for maximum participation in the entire process.

c. Criteria for Membership.

Members of the Vision Task Group should meet the following criteria:

- (1) Be willing to make the commitment of time.
- (2) Possess either the skills in or interest in major change in complex organizations.
- (3) Have highly-developed listening and interpreting skills.
- (4) Work well in groups to achieve group goals.
- (5) Be knowledgeable about the, the broader community, the Christian Church Disciples of Christ Church, the congregation and how it functions.
- (6) Demonstrate a strong commitment to the church.
- (7) Be recognized, respected and trusted in the church by leaders, members, and opinion-makers.
- (8) Contribute to a balance in the team of gender, age, ethnicity, and theological perspective.
- (9) Carry no obvious baggage that would limit others' trust and confidence in the group.
- (10) Be in a position to link with some other key segment of the congregation.
- (11) Demonstrate concern for the whole of First Christian Church and not just one aspect, group or ministry concern.
- (12) Contribute to the presence of important skills: planning, writing, organizing, strategic thinking, detail management, creative thinking, problem solving, biblical and theological knowledge, artistic expression, leadership, etc.
- (13) The size of the team should be between 6 and 10 members.

CONVENER/CO-CONVENER:

The Conveners share the mission and responsibilities of the Vision Task Group. In addition the Conveners have the following responsibilities:

1. Design meetings of the Vision Task Group in consultation with the Pastors and key others.
2. Preside at meetings of the Vision Task Group.

3. Interpret the work of the Vision Task Group to the Ministries Council and Board and to other local church groups.
4. Assure effective administration of the Discernment process.
5. Confer regularly with consultant assigned to the local church, with staff and others responsible for various aspects of the Discernment process.
6. Link with key leadership groups in the local church.
7. Encourage persons and groups to participate in the Discernment process.
8. Communicate regularly with the Pastors and other clergy about the Discernment process.
9. Participate in consultations and special leadership training designed for key leadership of the Vision Task Group.

ROLE OF THE PASTOR/S:

1. Provide advice and counsel to the Vision Task Group, as an active participant on the Vision Task Group at times.
2. Assure the Discernment process is effectively managed.
3. Meet regularly with the convener, consultant assigned to the local church and other key leaders for planning and evaluation.
4. Attend all consultation and leadership training days.
5. Interpret the work of the Vision Task Group to various local church publics.
6. Assist in naming the members of the Vision Task Group.
7. Articulate regularly the theology and motivation behind engaging in a major discernment process to more faithfully and effectively discern what it is God calls this local church to be and do.
8. Assume a key role as teacher in laying the biblical and theological foundations for church transformation, and in preparing leadership for this task.
9. Be an active advocate and sponsor of the process by demonstrating commitment and support through word and action.
10. Be concerned for a linking with other local church in the community, in the Covenant, and in the Region.

MINISTRIES COUNCIL AND BOARD:

The Vision Task Group reports to the Ministries Council and Board. The support and involvement of the Ministries Council and Board in the Discernment process is essential to its success. Responsibilities of the Ministries Council and Board include the following:

1. Assist in naming the Vision Task Group with the pastors.
2. Stay informed about the Discernment process.
3. Assist in interpreting the Discernment process throughout the local church.
4. Participate in shaping the plan for the future.
5. Provide for the availability of the clergy and staff as the primary internal project managers of the Discernment process.
6. Review and evaluate the progress of the Discernment process.

7. Participate in the study, prayer, analysis and discussion that will contribute to the development of a plan for the future.
8. Review and approve the various documents and decisions that are prepared and proposed by the Discernment process.
9. Provide overall advocacy and support for the Discernment process.
10. Model in the way it functions a quality of life that reflects the vision and that emerges from discerning God's call to transform the church.

THE CONGREGATION

The First Christian Church community is the body that has concern for the common life and ministry of the congregation as a whole. The commitment, prayer, and support of the faith community from the start and every step of the way are essential for the Process to achieve its goals. The members of the congregation are in a position to invite and encourage one another to embark on this journey of discerning God's vision together. There will be multiple opportunities for members of the congregation to pray, reflect together, analyze, and discern together.

EXISTING COMMITTEES AND GROUPS

There are many ways that First Christian Church currently comes together to engage in ministry and mission. As appropriate and feasible, existing groups will be asked to claim space together to engage in the work of prayer, listening to God and to one another, reflection, analysis, and imagining a faithful future together.

OTHER GROUPS/GATHERINGS

Other gatherings may be created to insure participation for faithful and effective discernment. Different kinds of gatherings are proposed. How these eventually will be designed depends on the task, the access and availability of participants, and the goals of each phase of the process. As we begin, we envision the following groupings:

1. Conferences on the Present and Future. Gatherings will be conducted periodically throughout the process across the congregation to encourage broad participation. The first will be designed to respond to name "key issues" facing First Christian Church that have implications for our future. The second will be designed to imagine a faithful and exciting future interacting with a Missional Strategy.
2. Bible study groups. Study groups will be created to cultivate "faithful imagination" as the congregation prepares to discern direction for the future.
3. Vision Retreat. This broad participation gathering will reinforce and build upon the biblical images of the church's mission that are lifted up through the Bible studies.

Project Overview – Five Phases:

Phase One: Get Ready for the Journey.

Goal: To help key leaders and congregation as a whole to develop commitment in advance of the process.

- Design the process roadmap.
- Build the case for taking this journey.
- Introduce the process.
- Get organized.

Phase Two: Develop a Common View of Reality.

Goal: Develop a consensus picture of the current key issues facing us.

- Developing a church profile that considers the church's heritage, its cultural context, and membership dynamics.
- Results in a clear set of "strategic issues" to be addressed by the rest of the process.

Phase Three: Discern God's Vision.

Goal: Define the future direction of the congregation.

- Scripture study, prayer and reflection, crafting a missional strategy.
- Results in a Missional Strategy to guide the church into the future.

Phase Four: Design Congregation Life and Witness.

Goal: Design the action plans, policies, and structures required to embed the Missional Strategy in and through all aspects of the congregation.

- Creative thinking is harnessed to express the vision in concrete ministry plans.
- Results in a well-coordinated and carefully mapped ministry plan to guide the church over the next 5-10 years.

Phase Five: Live into a Faithful Future.

Goal: Embed the Vision and Missional Strategy in practical and concrete ways that have been designed.

- Purposeful change is managed by key leaders.
- Results in the formation and implementation of a transition plan to make the changes and manage the endings and new beginnings.

Proposed Timeline the Discernment Process First Christian Church

GETTING READY FOR THE JOURNEY

Winter/Spring 2008

February 15-16 Meeting with the Ministries Council and Vision Task Group (VTG) to begin to design a discernment process.

March/April Vision Task Group meeting.

- Adjustments made to a design in light of feedback from Feb 15-16. VTG reviews changes, makes adjustments and presents the design to the Ministries Council for feedback. Incorporate additional feedback.
- Build communication strategy to build commitment and awareness in the congregation for engaging in a time of discernment.

April -- May

- Engage the Congregation in considering the process design.
- Plan for process Kick-off. Plan detailed scenario for “Developing a Common View of Reality” phase.
- May 11 – Kick off the Discernment Process

CLAIMING A COMMON VIEW OF REALITY

Summer-Fall (2008)

- May 11 – June 8, engage the congregation members in a process of “appreciative inquiry” with members interviewing one another.
- Challenges/opportunities from the 2000 process are reviewed and observations made about changes in current context are prepared to test with the congregation.
- Feed back from the appreciative inquiry and observations on a changed context are shared with the congregation over a five week period (July 27 – August 24). Scripture reflection that corresponds to the study process may be integrated in.
- September 7, this phase culminates with a Conference on the Present as the congregation names and claims the opportunities and challenges of its reality for ministry.

DISCERNING GOD’S CALL

Fall – October to December (Advent)

- Development of a Bible study process using the church’s current vision as key content for discernment. Bible study in groups with sermon series and some faith sharing over a series of weeks.
 - Option of holding a congregation wide retreat, or structuring a series of Sundays as mini-retreats building on one another all reflecting on our Vision and its implications for our future.

CRAFTING A MISSIONAL STRATEGY

Winter – January to March (2009)

- **Leadership Retreat.** Ministries Council, Church Board and VTG come together to shape the Missional Strategy that will guide First Christian into the future, providing clarity around:
 - (a) Role-and-mission,
 - (b) Key Result Areas and Overarching Goals,
 - (c) Target Participant Groups,
 - (d) Core Beliefs and Commitments.
- Identify and train “ministry teams” (or other structure) for designing innovative ministry plans that move the church toward its discerned future.
- **Conference on the Future (March)** to engage the congregation in interacting with the missional strategy and generating innovative ideas and alternative futures for how the church might move to the future focusing on key mission areas.

DESIGNING CONGREGATIONAL LIFE AND WITNESS

Spring/Summer (2009) April to September

- Leaders and members of the congregation engage in identifying innovations to life and ministry that move toward embodying your discerned future. .
- Innovations are shared, refined, and harmonized.

LIVING INTO A MISSIONAL FUTURE

Fall (2009 → on-going)

- Ministries Council supports planning for transitions experimenting with new ministries, structures and processes.
- Ongoing: Lead the congregation to embody the Missional Strategy, learn from and refine the ministry plans.
- **Congregational Meeting.** Embraces innovations at a Congregational Meeting
- Implementation of processes that support on-going learning and innovation.