

First Congregational Appleton

Strategic Thinking Process

WHERE WE STARTED	1
WHAT WE DID	3
WHAT WE FOUND	5
WHAT WE SUGGEST	8

**VAN
DER
SALL**

Where we started

How a story starts is just as important as how it ends.

In the fall of 2019, we received a letter at Vandersall Collective from the Horizons Team at First Congregational looking for a “partner to help us through ... crucial conversations and decisions.” The decisions the Team expected to be making were around how to use their 50-year old building, which is in need of restoration. There were three options on the table: perform basic restorations, upgrade the site “above and beyond,” or move and rebuild in a new location.

In the first call from Mieke Vandersall to Steve Savides, there was an instant connection and excitement for what might be. Mieke immediately began gathering a team for conversation with the Horizons Team. The team included Dave Harder, of Parish Properties in Ottawa, Canada. Mieke would focus on strategic thinking on the project, Dave would bring experience in what we call property activation. He also brought a network of real estate folks with an eye for the potential in a space to connect to organizational priorities and the ability to clarify what is possible once priorities are articulated. The final component of our team drew from our extensive capital campaign experience, which positioned us to help First Congregational move easily from strategic work on its priorities into a fundraising Feasibility Study and Capital Campaign.

In early 2020, we submitted a proposal, which led to a conversation with the Horizons team. Dave and Mieke flew to Appleton for a meeting with the Church Council to present our proposed approach to working together. After Church Council approval, we began to finalize the contract, working with a small team led by Bill Ritcey as Church Council President. This involved an extensive back and forth with a final contract approved in early March 23, 2020. This contract included three onsite visits to Appleton to lead three retreats, clarify objectives for property usage, connect with city planners and developers, and identify steps for the next stage of work.

No sooner had we signed our agreement than New York City and much of Canada entered Covid-19 lock down. Wisconsin, like the rest of the world, entered into a time of far-reaching Covid modifications. Our lives were changed forever, and the “what, when, where, why and how” of church began to shift.

Where we started

First Congregational Appleton put a pause on our work together until we could again gather in person. You spent that time digging into what community looks like when social distancing and safety limits the ability to gather in person. Through virtual worship, gathering in the parking lot when possible, drive-through communion, and more, you learned how to adapt and understand yourselves in a new way. Over the next year and a half we kept in touch and continued to modify our approach based on our external reality. This was a time of fits and starts, reflective of the world around us. This time of experimenting and reflecting, we believe, while exhausting, brings a new and valuable dimension to the work that we are now set to begin together.

As if the disruption of Covid wasn't enough, in the midst of the pandemic, Pastor Steve Savides, beloved to many in the congregation, had heart issues that were deepening. In mid 2021 he announced his retirement date of June 2022.

The clarity of purpose for First Congregational became even more critical to articulate. With a pastoral search process on the horizon, you need that clarity as a guide for the next pastor you will call. With the departure of Pastor Steve raising an understandably significant amount of grief and anxiety, there will also be an opportunity to reconfigure the staffing constellation for the next generation. There have been many changes at First Congregational including the ones forced by Covid, Pastor Steve's retirement, the death of former Associate Pastor Kathryn Kuhn, the addition of Pastor Laurie Lyter-Bright, and of course the significant shifting in the expression of mainline Christianity which was underway before Covid and took an existential turn during the pandemic.

It's a lot. There is no denying this.

In August 2022, we began our work in earnest through an adjusted contract, now with an explicit intention to prepare you for your upcoming pastoral search and the future itself.

On a personal note, we wish to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation for all of you. We have a great deal of hope for your future and sincerely hope that we are able to walk alongside you during your next steps. Our prayer is for you to be crystal clear in the gifts you are offering to the world.

The following report outlines the work we've done in the strategic thinking phase of our engagement and points toward the next steps we see emerging for you from this work.

What we did

We conducted our work in several phases. In the course of that work we:

Gathered regularly with the Core Committee: Steve Savides, Steve Hirby, Georgia Burrence, Kris Heitpas, Mike Radtke and supported by Holly Volkman. Julia Lammers was also briefly on the committee but had to drop out due to a move and beginning of new employment. This team provided feedback and was available for deeper discussions into initial findings from the retreats and interviews.

Introduced the engagement process to the congregation with a letter and a visit to virtual worship from Dave and Mieke on January 30. We've included the letter with this report.

Read and analyzed materials provided by the church, such as annual reports, bulletins, building reviews, and the "Open Door" publication.

Prepared for and led two online retreats with an expanded and representative group of congregants. The first retreat had 19 participants and the second had 16 participants.

Interviewed 19 individuals, both from within and outside the congregation. We also took the interview questions to the senior high youth group and Dave Harder met with them via Zoom.

Wrote and provided a survey for the congregation to ask questions around the past, present and future identity of the congregation and God's call to you. 166 individuals and households filled out the surveys.

Conducted data analysis of the immediate and wider neighborhood and community in Fox Valley. This was conducted by Dave Kresta.

Explored potential development options for the property. Dave Harder met with the Mayor of Appleton and city planners. We looked at zoning, potential partnerships, and what was feasible on the site. When we go to Appleton we will take a tour of the city with the city planner and meet with potential developers.

What we did

Our first step was to work with the core committee to define success for the project.

Here are the success measures through which we have framed our findings.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

- We really tap into the voice of the congregation so it is a collective membership voice than any one of ours;
- Opportunities to have large scale conversations about the future are rare and precious. A measure of success is how broadly we can engage people. Also the risk of the process like this is that it gets a snapshot of where we are now but there is also an opportunity of growth and learning--so how we can do that;
- Use this as an opportunity to think differently about where we want to be. Not just to reproduce where we are;
- Hone in on who are we and who we want to be;
- Dig into property and neighborhood so that we can change our mission and vision and it is disappointing if we don't seize that opportunity;
- Preserve tradition but open ourselves to new ideas;
- Utilize all communication/new communications channels to reach various voices;
- Everyone felt excited by the process.

What we found

ENGAGEMENT AND CARE

Without exception, our interactions with committee members, community members, reading the surveys and leading the retreats left us with clarity that there is energy at First Congregational. At times it is nervous energy, but energy there is. This gift is not to be underestimated. You care about the current and future of First Congregational, and with that comes energy for change, as hard as change can be.

YOU ARE RESOURCE RICH

When we are embedded in our own reality it is very hard to acknowledge that reality. Our view becomes obscured by cloudiness about current stresses, problems and challenges. As an outsider, and in speaking with outsiders to your community, we found that you have a tremendous amount of resources. You have built cultural capital throughout the Fox Valley over the generations, and are seen as a trusted companion to non-profit organizations. Your congregants are engaged in their community in countless ways, and they gain strength for this engagement through their participation at First Congregational. In addition, you give of your financial resources, and these resources make a difference. Finally, you are sitting on a very large plot of land in an area that is rapidly growing. Through relationships, social capital, your property, and your heart for social justice, much can be accomplished.

PEOPLE ARE NERVOUS

In reviewing the fears for the future, we find that you're dancing on the head of a proverbial pin. Many know change is required, many believe you need to keep doing what you are doing, but many also are concerned about change in pastoral leadership, the correct observation that mainline Christianity and the wider culture that privileged Protestant expression is changing alongside that there isn't a great deal of imagination from survey responders for what might come next. It's awfully hard to catch hold of imagination when other options for possibility haven't yet been presented. That said, the engagement of the retreat group showed just what is possible when you are led through a process to spark imagination.

What we found

YOUR CULTURE IS LARGELY DEFINED BY WHAT YOU DO AND THE VALUE OF EXCELLENCE

The appreciation for excellent preaching, excellent music, and excellent worship connects your legacy and your present. The excellence of programs and worship defines success and is prevalent in your culture. This is a blessing and a curse. The blessing is your ability to organize large-scale, organized opportunities and the curse is that at times this striving for excellence prevents vulnerability that fosters true connection. In the cracks, crevices and messiness is often where we find God.

SUCCESS COMES IN DOING

You define success by doing rather than being. In your doing, your definition of service is largely by serving those outside of yourself who need help, and in doing so often does not create opportunities for connection with those you are serving.

YOUR PURPOSE IS CONNECTED TO THE OPEN DOOR

Your understanding of your purpose is summed up by the tagline/descriptor, “The church of the open door.” This was reiterated in all aspects of our work with you. The deeper purpose behind this descriptor, however, is a bit obscure. Our recommendations make suggestions on defining and considering this as an accurate aspirational descriptor.

YOU WANT TO MOVE FROM WELCOMING TO BELONGING

If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that we deeply need to be known by others, cared for, and encouraged. We need each other in ways that we might have lost sight of previously. To be “welcoming” can often simply mean that people can come to join us as long as they look, act, talk, and express themselves like “us.” To belong is something entirely different. To belong is what, we believe, you all are looking for.

What we found

YOU ARE IN-BETWEEN

Not only with regard to the position of the senior pastor, or the in-betweenness that Covid has forced; you are also in-between in who you are and how you express that. We believe you have the tools needed to chart the future course, and when you do that you will be able to shift the other spaces of in-betweenness that you are in, in particular around your staffing structure, building usage, and worship expression.

PROPERTY FULL OF POSSIBILITIES

In meeting with the Mayor and City Planner it became clear that a development on part of the site would be supported and of great value to the city. With the right project proposed, there is excitement and willingness from the city to work with you on rezoning, tax credits for affordable housing, and curating a potential partnership with the Oneida Nation. See recommendations below for next steps.

WHO IS AROUND YOU?

From a residential standpoint, the block group immediately to the west of First Congregational (but still within the 15-minute walk radius) has the highest rate of poverty in the immediate area (30%), relatively high minority representation (24%), and a large influx of new residents, many of whom are non-white and/or Hispanic. This block group also has a much lower rate of home ownership (49%) compared to the block group in which First Congregational is located (84%).

We also found a gap in arts programs, in particular anything that is not classically minded, such as the academic programs Lawrence University.

What we suggest

COMMUNICATE THE RESULTS OF THIS PROCESS

Take the opportunity to thank everyone involved through interviews, retreats, and survey participants. Share pieces of this study to spark further conversation, deepen relationships, and crystallize future partnerships.

CRYSTALLIZE YOUR EMERGING PURPOSE (CLARIFYING THE WHY)

Your emerging purpose connects to a personality that welcomes hard questions, that seeks deep connection, that is curious and expansive and creative. Drill deeper into the aspirational attributes by carefully defining them, providing opportunities for further feedback, and claiming them as your own. With your purpose vetted and claimed, purpose becomes your lens for decision making. We do not see this needing to be a long, arduous process.

EXPRESS YOUR PURPOSE THROUGH A STRATEGIC FILTER

Once you define your purpose you can then translate it into a strategic filter, which is a set of objective criteria used to frame strategic decisions. It provides a rubric for current and future strategic decisions at the parish which include missional strategies, budget allocation, building usage, and program evaluation.

REDEFINE SUCCESS

Look again at the scorecard we began at the retreat. This is a beginning framework. In your revisiting of this scorecard consider a few core metrics that connect with your purpose. Once you feel good about these (knowing they will consistently need to be revised and are never perfect!), begin to look at each area of church life (worship, staffing, community, gatherings) through this lens, alongside your strategic filter.

What we suggest

ALLOW YOURSELF TO JUST BE

You work so hard! You accomplish so much! Taking “doing” off the table, explore your value outside of striving for excellence or expressing your faith through action. This will give space for belonging and rejuvenation and by being you will attract others who so deeply feel the need for this in our culture that places our worth on our production. Consider how you do this through worship, through programs, and through gatherings.

CONSIDER YOUR GIFTS

You have so many gifts. We have a feeling that while you appreciate the gifts at your fingertips (social and political capital, money, property) which translate to power, that you might be tempted to respond to them by creating activities for yourselves—focusing on the doing that we mentioned earlier. Consider how you might channel your gifts into a way of being that embodies your purpose. Using the strategic filter, become more conscious of your gifts and your ability to use them for good. Power without consciousness is dangerous territory.

CONSIDER THE NEIGHBORHOOD: WHAT DO THEY NEED?

We have heard a desire to be a community hub, where organizations and people can find a sense of belonging. We found a need from a quantitative standpoint immediately to the west of First Congregational and from an organizational perspective, a community hub could provide space for businesses and nonprofit organizations that need below market or free space. Go back to the nonprofits that you already have a relationship with to ask them what they actually need, in addition to connecting with any existing arts-oriented nonprofits to determine if a community hub would be beneficial to them, perhaps for office or studio space, as well as to determine the need and level of community support for an arts program for youth and/or non-white/non-middle class people.

Consider how much you can gift versus run. Consider a transition from a “doing” economy to a “gifting” economy through how you relate. We believe this will assist you in deepening belonging.

What we suggest

LINK PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT WITH KEY PARTNERSHIPS

You are in a sweet spot that very few organizations ever possess ever. With your gifts and the capital that you possess in the City of Appleton and Fox Valley, drill down into your space needs and requirements (using that strategic filter!), match the partnership needs, and continue conversations with city planners and developers. They are ripe and ready to go—do not lose this opportunity. We believe that you could create a mixed-use housing development that could generate income as well as meet a community need. The time is now to leverage the social capital you have created over the years for a project that would serve both First Congregational and the City of Appleton.

In recap: clarify community and congregational objectives, create an Expression of Interest and through a number of interviews secure a development partner. Engage with the city and local partners. Craft a joint venture agreement that serves both the developer and congregation.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

First Congregational Church has many implications to it:

You are the first.

You are Congregational.

You are a church.

The “first” connects to the attributes of excellence, and hearkens to a day of colonization where being first was important and gave social clout. It is not connected to your geographic location or the particularity of being on the river.

The “Congregational” connects you to a denomination which does not have name recognition in the world we live in which is far less aware or concerned with denominationalism than in the past.

The “church,” while accurate, connotes a particular way of being church in the Fox Valley area. It does not symbolize the way that you are going – a gathering place for those who are seeking deeper connection with themselves, with God, and with community.

What we suggest

“The next stage in the renewal is what you might call the social reorganization of American Christianity. Denominational differences are becoming less important. People who used to be in different silos have been prompted by the turmoil to find one another and seek common cause.” David Brooks–NY Times Editorial

We recommend that you consider a name change that is connected to your attributes, your geographic location, and the expansiveness of who you are becoming.

BE READY TO LOSE PEOPLE

There are some folks who are unhappy with where the church is going, but there are others excited about what might be coming next, as much as they need to see options to gain traction. You will lose people in this transition. There are plenty of churches in the Fox Valley where they can go and worship. By doing the work above, however, you will gain so much more.

BE DECISIVE

Mieke recently was speaking with a national member of the United Church of Christ. She asked him what the biggest challenge was for UCC congregations these days. He responded: “lack of decisiveness. We can talk and talk and talk and do nothing, but by doing nothing we get nowhere.” Don’t be that kind of UCC congregation.
