

Future Visioning Team, Phase 1: Final Report [for website]

St. John United Lutheran Church, July 2023

Introduction

This Future Visioning Team launched a process of visioning to address the following problem, named in our initial discernment and communications:

Our congregation has currently unsustainable finances and dwindling attendance. National trends indicate deep changes in the way people engage with church. Our Future Visioning Team wants to engage members and community stakeholders to create an actionable vision and plan of St. John United Lutheran Church and the property's future.

To best discern values and vision, we invited our worshipping community, building users, and community members to participate. Their comments should anchor the next Future Visioning Team during Phase 2 of the process. If we were to define the entirety of the process as answering the questions of *WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY* and *HOW*, we believe we did significant work towards the *WHY* and *WHERE*, and some work on the other questions.

Our accomplishments included:

- ★ Prepared for changes that will be necessary to address our future. More people are now expecting change and starting to prepare for it, emotionally, spiritually and logistically.
- ★ Built community, respect and belonging, even as we sometimes differed in our expressed preferences and interests. We enjoyed spending time together and learned more about each other. There is a sense of pride that we are facing our future together. We CAN continue as a worshipping community.
- ★ Developed [Decision Criteria](#) through collaboration, which can be used to update and build on our existing Mission, Vision and Core Values.
- ★ Identified potential partners, and standards for what kinds of partnerships we most want and need to pursue.
- ★ Met with representatives from potential partners.
- ★ Deepened understanding of the nature and contours of our situation. More individuals are aware of the specific challenges we must address, as well as gifts we bring to bear on our future.

- ★ Shared [notes from our gatherings](#) with the Council and community via our website and e-News.

Findings from gatherings:

In addition to the notes that are available to the council and on our website, the team would like to highlight the following observations:

- ❖ Change is hard. While our community has moved collectively in our understanding of the nature of “the problem” and what will be needed to address it, individuals are still in different places in their own acceptance and readiness for what the future holds. Difficult conversations should not be put off, but handled with care and honesty.
- ❖ Building and neighborhood individuals, on the whole, didn’t seem interested in being a key part of the Future Visioning process itself.
 - That being said, a high level of trust in the church’s judgment was expressed. Many people were not surprised at the issues we are facing, because many churches and institutions are in similar situations.
 - More conversation is needed with our lease tenants. The observations above do not necessarily apply to these partners.
- ❖ Overall, we heard a willingness from our membership to be very flexible in order to meet our goals and to continue to be a worshipping community together.
 - For example, there was repeated mention of appreciation for music, liturgy and our Lutheran tradition, but a willingness to co-exist with other traditions and styles, even if that means practicing our traditions and preferences on a less frequent basis than weekly.
- ❖ We like each other and express a strong desire to continue to be a worshipping community, preferably at our current location.

Recommendations for the next phase:

- Form a team of 3-5 people. Include individuals with aptitude in finance, knowledge of the church property, continuity from the previous team, representation from the church council, and interest in partner development from the perspective of ministry and worship. The pastor may serve to fill one of these roles, but not all.
- Charge the team with developing a plan that can be voted on in January 2024 by the congregation, providing a mandate for continuing the work into Phase 3.
 - Phase 1 primarily worked on the *WHY* and *WHERE*. Phase 2 should focus on the *WHO* and *WHAT* and Phase 3 should work on the *HOW* and *WHEN*.
 - This plan should include:

- Active development of partners with potential investment assets and strong value alignment.
 - Specific information about how the plan will be financially sustainable, including such information as expected revenue streams and changes to expenditures.
 - Details about how the plan directly aligns with our Vision, Mission and Values.
 - Proposed changes to property and building use, and how they directly align with and utilize our resources to achieve our Mission, Vision, and Values. Details should include information such as proposed ownership structure, property management and maintenance strategy, and how spaces will be used “in common” or for exclusive use.
- It is expected that Phase 3 will pick up where Phase 2 leaves off, taking the mandate from the congregational meeting. This may include developing a Request for Proposals to draw up plans for property use and/or beginning to write up agreements with partners for property, ministry and mission collaboration.
- Potential Phase 2 team members should be given an estimate of the time commitment expected, as well as clarity around their charge. Meeting times as a committee should be fewer than the earlier phase, but research and partner development will require significant work. Council should help this phase to make it doable.
 - For example, some operations of the church may need to be limited in order to free up staff and volunteer time.
 - Additionally, the team and council should actively delegate, inviting others to participate in field trips. Teams could, for example, spend Sundays visiting other churches in teams and then reporting back.
- Begin every worship service with the reminder that “we are currently valuing flexibility, diversity and community” as we explore and adapt to a new future.
- In support of and in preparation for Phase 2, the council should
 - Revise and update our Mission, Vision and Values.
 - Be open and transparent so that the membership stays informed and aligned with the process.
 - Consider how our findings so far should change the budget, worship and ministry priorities.
 - For example, consider the shape of staffing and possible changes to ministry priorities in the face of a changing and narrowing vision and limited resources. As much as possible, talk with staff and volunteers soon and in a spirit of care and honesty. Be clear with expectations and

possible changes, giving people time to discern and make decisions for themselves.

- Create a Worship, Ministry and Faith Formation team to expand our diversity. This team should be empowered to work towards meaningful inclusion and innovation, in a way that will align with and forward our Mission, Vision and Values.

In conclusion, we have deepened our communal and individual understanding of the nature of the problem we face and started to develop a vision for our future. Some misconceptions we observed could be dispelled with repeated reminders that:

- *Fundraising will not solve our problem. The changing landscape of engagement with religion in the United States requires developing a new model for financial sustainability.*
- *New renters will not solve our problem. Deep partnerships of mutual commitment and investment are the primary avenue by which we will be able to continue as a worshipping community that gathers at 5515 Phinney Avenue North.*
- *New members will not solve our problem. God calls us to act towards meaningful and expansive inclusion in all places we inhabit, not growth for the sake of asset preservation.*
- **We can do hard things through Christ who strengthens us.**