

# **First Congregational Church in Thetford, United Church of Christ**

## **Five Year Plan for 2008 to 2012**

### **About this Document**

This five year plan is made up of three main sections: Mission Statement; Vision Statement; and Objectives and Goals. Each section has a brief introduction explaining it, mostly drawn from the book we followed in our planning process: *Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations* by Gil Rendle and Alice Mann. If there are terms you feel need clarification, you may find them defined in the Glossary, appended to the plan.

This document is the result a multi-year process of congregation-wide conversations and research overseen by the Church Council and led by DOV (Defining Our Vision), made up of Charlie Buttrey, Chair; Jody Biddle, Secretary; Bob Hagen; Robin Osborne; Lilla Willey; Scot Zens; and Pastor Tom Kinder, ex officio. It was adopted by a unanimous vote at a warned congregational meeting on April 27, 2008.

### **Mission Statement**

The mission statement describes who we are as a congregation and what we feel God is calling us to do. It is a statement of our congregation's identity, character and purpose as we understand them now, in the spring of 2008.

The First Congregational Church in Thetford, Vermont, United Church of Christ, is a progressive, Open and Affirming congregation, Open to All. We are diverse people on a journey together following the way of Jesus Christ. We find unity in the shared quest for truth rather than in one common creed. Our church provides a sanctuary for spiritual nurture and growth through services of word, music and silence, and through education, discussion and mutual support. We feel called to promote Christ's way of nonviolence, creating a loving, just society for all. We care especially for our youth, for the struggling people of our world and community, and for the health of God's creation. We expect there to be a cost to our faithful discipleship, a cost of our time, talent and substance, and of our selfless love, humble service and personal risk. This is a church of courage and of comfort. This is a church of passion and of humor. This is a church of Christ and of solidarity with people of all faiths who are striving to create a world of peace and justice, mercy and love.

## Vision Statement

The Vision Statement gives a picture of what the church will look like in five years if it continues to be the church described in the Mission Statement above. The Vision Statement not only connects back to the Mission Statement, but also ahead to the next section, the Objectives and Goals. We have done two things to make these connections clear. We have reprinted sentences from the Mission Statement in italics that relate to the following part of the Vision Statement, and we have put the number of an Objective in parentheses after a Vision Statement sentence that relates to it. We put this Vision forth with humility. We know that only by the grace of God will we succeed, and we are fully aware that over the five years we may find that our discernment of God's will in this Vision has not always been perfect, or that our calling has changed.

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If we are faithful to our mission and fulfill our objectives and goals, five years from now we envision that our church will look like the one described below.

As a progressive congregation, we will be lively, open-minded and open-hearted, engaged in interfaith dialogue and seeking spiritual wisdom in all traditions—including scientific and other intellectual disciplines. We will be seeking to put our faith in God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit into words that have integrity and resonate with our experience and understanding. We will find grace in questioning and searching along our spiritual journey, rather than in fundamental doctrinal certainty.

*There are times in the lives of all people of conscience when the truth in one's heart is in such deep opposition to the falsehood of the world that one must put everything else in life aside and act upon the truth.*

Sue Frankel-Streit,  
Catholic Worker activist

As an Open and Affirming, Open to All congregation we will help and encourage other churches to open themselves in the same ways. (Objective IV) We will work to end oppression and discrimination whenever we encounter them. Our congregation will be known as people who attend and lead programs and demonstrations that challenge injustice. (VI) We will have considered taking a stand for marriage equality for people of all sexual orientations. (V)

As a member congregation of the United Church of Christ, we will have considered endorsing the five leading characteristics of the national denomination. (Objective I, Goal A) We already have voted to be two of them, Open and Affirming and Open to All. Five years from now we will have considered becoming a Peace and Justice church (II), a Multiracial and Multicultural church (III), and a United and Uniting church (I.B) as well.

We will continue to welcome warmly all who come through our doors. (VII) We will have expanded our outreach through our Calling and Caring program and Floyd Dexter

and Alice Francisco funds, continuing to give comfort and assistance to our members and the community around us, keeping actively connected to those in need. (X through XIII)

Looking around the congregation on a Sunday morning we will continue to see diversity of ages, backgrounds and perspectives. We will also be encouraging increased racial and cultural diversity.

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We will become a church known for providing rich and varied spiritual programs. We will provide worship services with a high quality of intellectual and artistic content, with a strong music program. (XVII, XVIII) We will honor and encourage silent prayer in worship. We will offer programs on the study and practice of meditation and centering prayer as well as other courses to help people along their spiritual journey, including Bible study and issue-specific discussions. The pastor, trained laity and other clergy in our church will offer spiritual direction or pastoral care to those who seek it.

Christ's way of nonviolence will be central to the congregation's self-understanding. We will work to create a world without violence on any level, from war to domestic abuse to

*I no longer believe that we can change anything in the world until we have first changed ourselves. And that seems to me the only lesson to be learned from this war.*  
Etty Hillesum,  
Nazi holocaust victim

poverty to environmental degradation. The way of peace and non-violence will be preached from our pulpit, promoted through educational and informational programs open to the community, and pursued through direct action. We will take public stands on issues of peace and justice. These efforts will be supported by our individual spiritual work and the spiritual programs offered in our church. Others, Christian and non-Christian alike, who long for a nonviolent world will look to and work with our congregation. (VI)

We will explore how to resolve conflict in our congregation and our individual lives in nonviolent ways that maintain loving community. We will develop systems for working through differences and disagreements. We will provide opportunities for all to speak, be heard and responded to, ideally before concerns grow into conflicts. (IX)

*I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know—the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.*  
Albert Schweitzer, pastor,  
theologian, doctor, winner of  
the Nobel Prize for Peace

We will have particularly strong programs for children and youth, helping them on their spiritual journeys and teaching them the values and methods of Christ's way. These will include stable and active interfaith youth groups led by a youth minister. We will have an engaging Sunday School program and child care so that families feel welcome to bring children of all ages. The youth programs will encourage our children and teens to question and think creatively as appropriate for their age, and to seek their

calling—how God calls them to use their gifts in each stage of their lives. (XI, XIV-XVI)

Our care for God’s creation will be apparent not only in our educational programs and advocacy, but also in the way we operate as a church. We will be striving to have our church be carbon neutral and environmentally responsible in the products and resources we use. (XIX.E)

*Mission: We expect there to be a cost to our faithful discipleship, a cost of our time, talent and substance, and of our selfless love, humble service and personal risk. This is a church of courage and of comfort. This is a church of passion and of humor. This is a church of Christ and of solidarity with people of all faiths who are striving to create a world of peace and justice, mercy and love.*

Stewardship will be a topic we consider year-round. We will have restored our beloved building which will continue to be one of our most important forms of ministry—providing space for worship, meetings, childcare and other benefits to the community

*Above all, maintain constant, charitable love for one another.... Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.*  
I Peter 4:8-10

seven days a week. (XIX) We will operate with consistently sustainable budgets. (XXI) We will grow in our understanding of self-giving not as the price we have to pay to belong to a church, but as the reason God has given us all the gifts we have. We will become more adept at finding small things for busy people to do. We will expand our capacity as individuals and as a congregation to take personal risks in Christ-like service. We will consider ways in which we can be stewards of hope in an increasingly unstable world.

This church will continue to be a place where we find the comfort of familiarity, reassuring faith and unconditional loving kindness. We will also cultivate the courage and strength needed to confront the challenges we face. We will continue to be a church that enjoys the blessings of joy and laughter, celebrating the God-given goodness and beauty of life together. In addition, we will strive to be a church that harnesses and directs Christ-like passion to create a world more like God’s realm. We will be a church where our self-sacrificing, risk-taking, loving service is balanced by rejuvenating times that refresh our souls.

## **Objectives and Goals**

Objectives describe the “what” and Goals the “how” of our plan for the next five years—what specific things we will do to create the church described in our Vision Statement, and how we will do them. The “how” includes who will do them and by when. This list may change as we move through the years. We hope the Objectives and Goals will be reviewed and adjusted every year at Annual Meeting and at the first gathering of Committees and Boards, and then set for that year in an annual work plan. Some may be deleted and others added along the way. What follows is not complete even now. It does not include many activities that are ongoing, such as worship, spiritual programs or the usual administration of the church. In addition, the entire subject of rejuvenation still needs its own set of Objectives and Goals that we hope will be forthcoming. Finally, while this list may seem overwhelming at first, its activities are spread out over five years. The various people responsible in each area have given their objectives, goals and workload due consideration before including them in this plan.

### ***Identity Objectives***

#### **I. Objective: To have the congregation increase its awareness of what it means to identify itself with the United Church of Christ.**

Goal A: Within six months of the adoption of this plan, the Church Council will launch an awareness-raising educational program about what the UCC stands for and how it has evolved and our position in it. It will also explore how we can both serve the denomination and take advantage of what it offers.

Goal B: In 2012 the Council will lead a discussion about what it means to be a United and Uniting church, and how we could better fulfill this central principle of our denomination.

#### **II. Objective: To have the congregation consider identifying itself as a Peace and Justice, or Just Peace church.**

Goal A: In 2008 the Mission Committee will meet with members of Vermont UCC churches who have either become, or are taking steps to become, Peace & Justice churches, and with the Peace group of the Vermont UCC Conference Department of Mission, to learn what tools and processes have worked for other congregations.

Goal B: In 2008 the Mission Committee will offer an educational program about the significance of becoming a Peace & Justice or Just Peace church, and how it would affect the church.

Goal C: The Mission Committee will also lead church-wide discussion of whether we should vote to identify ourselves as a Peace & Justice or Just Peace church.

Goal D: Discussion will be followed by a congregational meeting in early 2009 to vote on becoming a Peace and Justice or Just Peace church.

Goal E: Following an affirmative vote, the Deacons would provide an ongoing forum for dialogue about the appropriateness and effectiveness of specific nonviolent actions.

**III. Objective: To have the congregation consider identifying itself as a Multiracial and Multicultural church.**

Goal A: In 2011 the Mission Committee will gather members from the congregation who are particularly interested in multiracial/multicultural work to lead the discussions and process concerning identifying ourselves as a Multiracial and Multicultural church.

Goal B: In 2011 the Mission Committee will offer an educational program about the significance of identifying as a Multiracial and Multicultural church, and how it would affect the church.

Goal C: The Mission Committee will also lead a discussion of whether or not we should vote to identify ourselves as such.

Goal D: The discussion may be followed by a congregational meeting to vote on becoming a Multiracial and Multicultural church.

**IV. Objective: To have our congregation continue to help other congregations in the region over the next five years to become Open and Affirming and Open (i.e. Accessible) to All.**

Goal A: In 2008 the Deacons will put the word out through denominational publications that we are available to talk to churches about our experience in issues relating to both Open and Affirming and Open to All.

Goal B: The Church Council will delegate the task of coordinating volunteers from our congregation to go to churches or appear on panels or make presentations as opportunities arise on Open to All issues.

Goal C: The Deacons will respond to requests for presentations or assistance relating to Open and Affirming issues.

**V. Objective: To have our congregation consider taking a stand on the issue of marriage equality.**

Goal A: In April-June 2008 the Deacons will host a series of educational events for the public and will help lead a worship service celebrating our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of becoming Open and Affirming. The focus of the event will be on marriage equality.

Goal B: Following these events the Deacons will lead discussion of the idea of adding our name to the other churches in Vermont that have endorsed the freedom to marry or marriage equality position. (June – September 2008)

Goal C: Following the discussion period, the congregation will be asked to meet and vote on our endorsement. (June – September 2008)

### *Increasing Effectiveness Objectives*

#### **VI. Objective: To have our congregation increase its effectiveness and the effectiveness of its members as advocates for justice, peace, and nonviolence.**

Goal A: From time to time over the coming five years the Mission Committee will host events which educate and empower members of the congregation and community to become more active in challenging violence in its many forms – to include war, poverty, and environmental degradation among others.

Goal B: The Mission Committee will direct the congregation to opportunities for action, in some cases initiating those actions and in others joining already existing projects.

Goal C: The Mission Committee will work with the Pastoral Relations Board to recruit two Just Peace/non-violence guest preachers each year.

Goal D: The Mission Committee will organize a study group, open to the broader community, to examine contemporary situations in which nonviolence is practiced in our world, and to apply lessons learned from these situations to our own lives.

Goal E: In 2008 the Mission Committee will put up a bulletin board in the church to share information on upcoming Peace & Justice actions and events.

#### **VII. Objective: To have organized our efforts to make visitors and new attendees feel more welcome and introduce them to our values and programs.**

Goal A: By the end of 2009, the Welcoming Committee and other volunteers will develop materials that describe our programs and values and will make these materials available to the community at large and to visitors on Sunday mornings.

Goal B: By the end of 2009, the Welcoming Committee will coordinate greeters who help direct new people to the materials on Sunday mornings and make sure they feel welcome.

Goal C: By the end of 2009, the Welcoming Committee will coordinate volunteers to do follow-up with new people as appropriate, such as occasional new-people get-togethers.

**VIII. Objective: To advertise our spiritual and educational programs more widely to the general public and other churches so that people know to look to this church for such programs.**

Goal: By 2009 the Deacons will develop an effective publicity plan to serve as a template for anyone in our congregation who is offering a program that is open to the public. The Deacons will provide the plan to each person or group.

**IX. Objective: To have established a forum where conflict within the congregation can be addressed before a congregational meeting is necessary.**

Goal: Before June 2010, the Deacons and Pastoral Relations Board will investigate formal processes for communication in times of conflict and make recommendations on a protocol for adoption by the congregation. This process will include a way of encouraging direct, healthy communication, maintaining loving community through times of difference or disagreement.

***Calling and Caring Objectives***

**X. Objective: To have established a Community Care Team**

Goal A: The Calling and Caring Coordinator and Deacons will invite volunteers for a training program to offer care, compassion and comfort in our community. This training will include learning ways to create a safety net for people in crisis, skills for visiting the sick and the elderly, and procedures for recruiting our local service agencies for support in our efforts to reach out to people in need.

Goal B: Before 2009 Jody Biddle will have offered and completed a community care training to assist in finding ways to foster relationships with the sick, with shut-ins and with people in need. This training program will teach skills to meet myriad needs in the Thetford community.

Goal C: From the guidance of this training program, the trainees will maintain a connection with congregation members who are unable to attend worship on Sundays.

**XI. Objective: To involve our Youth Program in Calling and Caring activities.**

Goal A: To honor the wishes of our young people who would like to offer more hands-on help, the Calling and Caring Coordinator will work closely with our youth group

coordinator and committee for youth and our youth themselves to encourage involvement in a range of community service projects.

Goal B: The Calling and Caring Coordinator will promote the idea of a teen adopting a senior (Teens for Seniors) and if there is interest will work with the youth group coordinator and youth to carry it out.

**XII. Objective: To have fostered the creation of a group of musicians for musical outreach for the purpose of offering comfort at a difficult time.**

Goal: By the end of 2008 a group of volunteers will gather interested singers and musicians of all ages to develop a program of appropriate music for shut-ins, for the sick, for people at the end of life or for anyone who might find music to be a healing presence.

**XIII. Objective: To offer coping strategies, reassurance and resources to our community during times of disaster.**

Goal A: By 2012 the Calling and Caring Coordinator will gather a group interested in working on disaster preparedness (Disaster Preparedness Group).

Goal B: The Disaster Preparedness Group will seek to work with other Thetford churches, town Fire Department and Rescue Squads, schools and other appropriate local, state, regional and federal agencies.

Goal C: The Disaster Preparedness Group will explore how our church space and our church community might serve our town in a variety of ways in a variety of crises. It will meet with town officials to assess how our church building could serve as a site for staging, safety or housing in case of a disaster.

***Youth Objectives***

**XIV. Objective: To have our Sunday School serve all who attend.**

Goal A: The Committee for Youth, Sunday School Superintendent and volunteers will provide two grade levels of Sunday School during each school year that offer thoughtful discussions and activities for the children.

Goal B: Parents and congregation members will staff Sunday School for several weeks in a row.

Goal C: As a way to connect with the adults, those Sunday School students who wish to will regularly (monthly) share with the congregation what they are learning.

Goal D: We will have one class of less formal Sunday School during the summer vacation months.

**XV. Objective: To have a comprehensive curriculum that can be used by all teachers.**

Goal A: Members of the Committee for Youth, the Sunday School Superintendent and volunteers will review various published curricula by the summer of 2008 and develop a curriculum for two grade groups.

Goal B: For those teachers who want to develop their own programs, the Committee for Youth will have a framework of what it would like to see accomplished in Sunday School.

**XVI. Objective: To have strong programs for youth.**

Goal A: Our stable and active interfaith junior and senior youth groups will be led by a youth minister.

Goal B: The youth groups will meet during each school year.

Goal C: The Committee for Youth will explore ways to expand the Youth Groups beyond our church to include youth of other churches and faiths.

Goal D: The youth groups will work with our Calling and Caring program to identify community service projects that they can participate in to help others.

***Music Objectives***

**XVII. Objective: To have obtained a concert-quality piano for the sanctuary.**

Goal A: In 2008 the Music Committee will identify the piano or range of pianos they deem will meet our needs.

Goal B: In 2009 the Music Committee and others will develop a fund raising strategy, including seeking the donation of a piano, and will carry it out.

Goal C: The Music Committee will purchase the piano when funds are available.

**XVIII. Objective: To have increased the membership of the choir.**

Goal: In 2008 the Music Committee will form a plan for recruiting new choir members, seeking input from the choir and congregation.

### ***Building and Financial Objectives***

#### **XIX. Objective: To have improved the church's physical plant in time for the celebration of the town's and our church building's 225th anniversaries (2011 and 2012).**

Goal A: In 2008, the Trustees will develop a capital plan, identifying those capital needs which must be addressed and the cost of making those necessary improvements.

Goal B: In 2008, the Church Council shall begin planning a Capital Campaign drive to raise the funds necessary to make the improvements (including funds from grants). The Council shall select and begin working with a fund raising consultant.

Goal C: The Church Council will oversee operation of the Capital Campaign.

Goal D: Once sufficient funds are raised, the work on the capital improvements shall commence in time to be completed in 2011.

Goal E. In doing this work and in all our building, renovating, maintaining and operating activities, the church shall affirm a commitment to good stewardship of our planet. Such a commitment mandates good stewardship of our physical plant, careful attention to its carbon footprint and environmental impact, and supportive commitment to the efforts of individual members to further environmental preservation.

#### **XX. Objective: The church will reach a decision with respect to the long-term viability of the parsonage.**

Goal A: By no later than the end of 2008, the Trustees will have evaluated the options available to the church.

Goal B: By no later than the 2009 annual meeting, the Trustees will present those options to the Annual Meeting for the membership's consideration and vote.

#### **XXI. Objective: To have the church operating within the constraints of a sustainable budget and to have contributions to the church meet the demands placed upon the budget by the church's growth and expansion of services.**

Goal A: Revenues for annual operating expenses funded from the trust account will be limited to a draw of no more than a sustainable percentage annually of the account balance at budget time.

Goal B: The expansion or additions of programs and services will be considered only if there is a commensurate ability to raise the revenue necessary to maintain the program or service.

Goal C: The church will work with the support of the Pastor to maintain a climate of charitable giving to fund its programs and services.

Goal D: The Stewardship Committee and Fund Raising Committee will devise strategies and programs so that the annual budget may be adequately funded from sources both within and outside the church.

Goal E: All members of the church family will participate in some way in the stewardship goals of the church, according to the time, talent or substance each has available to share.

### ***Objectives and Goals by Year***

*The following lays out which Objectives and Goals are slated to be done in which years. Many of these are ongoing, and so appear in more than one year. Also, please note that some of these numbers represent policies or very small actions requiring little or no extra time or resources, while others are quite substantial.*

2008: Objective I, Goal A; II.A-C; IV.A-C; V; VI; X; XI; XII; XIV; XV; XVI; XVII.A; XVIII; XIX.A-B; XX.A; XXI

2009: II.D-E; IV.B-C; VI; VII; VIII; XI; XIV; XVI; XVII.B-C; XIX.C; XX.B; XXI

2010: II.E; IV.B-C; VI; IX; XI; XIV; XVI; XIX.D-E; XXI

2011: II.E; III; IV.B-C; VI; XI; XIII; XIV; XVI; XXI

2012: I.B; II.E; IV.B-C; VI; XI; XIV; XVI; XXI

## Glossary

*Centering Prayer* A contemporary form of silent meditation based on ancient Christian traditions, especially *The Cloud of Unknowing* written by an unknown English author. The Prayer of the Heart in our church offers instruction in Centering Prayer.

*Marriage Equality or Freedom to Marry* The cause of extending the right of legal marriage to couples of all sexual orientations.

*Multiracial and Multicultural Church* A leading characteristic of the United Church of Christ, and a description that indicates a church's intention to be open to and accommodating of people of all races and cultures, and to celebrate the presence of diverse races and cultures in its midst.

*Open and Affirming* A designation that churches can adopt to indicate their intention to be open to and affirming of people of all sexual orientations. Our congregation voted to become Open and Affirming on May 3, 1998.

*Open to All or Accessible to All* A leading characteristic of the United Church of Christ, and a description that indicates a church's intention to be open to people of all physical abilities. While our congregation has not voted to designate itself as such, it has carried out an *Open to All* capital campaign and it has built an addition and made other changes to make the church building accessible to all.

*Peace and Justice Church (or Just Peace Church)* A designation that churches can adopt to indicate their intention to be committed to working for peace and justice.

*Progressive Church* A term used to describe churches that share certain characteristics as defined by organizations like The Center for Progressive Christianity and books like *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots* by Union Theological Seminary professor Hal Taussig. Progressive churches can be described as being lively, open-minded and open-hearted; having a balance of intellect, emotion, spirit and social action; offering creative worship services and times for silence; struggling to express their faith with integrity; and embracing the cost of discipleship. The social justice concerns of progressive churches typically include issues of war and peace, poverty, race, the environment and sexual orientation, among others.

*United and Uniting Church* A leading characteristic of the United Church of Christ, and a description that indicates a congregation's intention to be united in Christ and in their love and care for one another while being diverse in many other ways, and also their intention to seek to unite with other diverse Christians outside their congregation on the same grounds, toward the goal of fulfilling the final prayer of Jesus, "That they may all be one." (John 17:23)

*United Church of Christ* The denomination to which our congregation belongs. It formed in 1957 at the merger of what had originally been four distinct denominations,

including the Congregational Church. The motto of the United Church of Christ is from Jesus' final prayer, "That they may all be one." (John 17:23) It has developed five leading characteristics over the past fifty years: being a united and uniting church; a multiracial and multicultural church; a church accessible to all; an open and affirming church; and a peace with justice church.