

How the Mission and Vision Task Force Came to Be
by Rebecca Gant

(From the September 28, 2014 Worship Service, edited)

Those of you who have been here for the last ten years or so have seen a lot of change. We've moved into this building, added a 3/4 time minister, added the Program Council as part of our governance structure, changed our Sunday morning schedule, hired a new 3/4 time Director of Lifelong Learning, grown in numbers, experienced a changing demographic, added Wednesday night programming, a men's group, a women's group, our small groups called Chalice Circles... and those are just the big changes. That's a lot of change in a short time.

All of these changes were undertaken with care. For those that affected everyone, the congregation had opportunities to give input and contribute to the conversation. We have dealt with differing opinions with open and frank communication and have made our way through the challenges and opportunities that have come with change.

This year we have the opportunity to listen to one another — our differing opinions and perspectives— again. We have the opportunity to share our stories with one another. And we have the opportunity to figure out our congregation's answers to some big questions. We are embarking on a congregation-wide conversation about our mission and vision. We will discuss our answers to the questions: Who are we? Whom do we serve? To whom are we accountable? What is our work in the world? or Why are we here?

This has been in the works since sometime before our congregation's annual meeting in May of 2013. At that meeting you may remember that we decided to put aside our five year plan. We had realized that our resources at that time did not match the dreams laid out in the plan and it was time to stop and take a breath. We had been through a period of rapid change and perhaps needed a year to regroup. So, we as a congregation did just that. And the leadership of the congregation got busy thinking about what to do next. We called Nancy Heege at the MidAmerica regional office to ask advice. She recommended that our leadership— the Board and Program Council— read the book *Holy Conversations*— a book about doing strategic planning with your congregation. Soon after that, we saw a seminar available on how to use the book. The Board voted to send me and our minister Jill to the seminar. Sitting in the seminar and talking more about it in the evening, Jill and I came to realize that an important part of the process for our congregation would be to come to agreement about what our congregation's vision and mission are. Jill and I and others in the leadership of the congregation had been seeing different issues pop up for a

couple of years prior to this time. Issues that would require more than an easy fix— issues that indicated that we did not share assumptions about who we are and what our work was in this world.

You might be thinking— Wait— isn't there a mission statement on our website? What's wrong with that one? I would say that there's nothing WRONG with that statement. It was appropriate when it was approved in 2004. Remember that list of changes that have happened in the last ten years? We are a different congregation than we were then. The recommendation from people who write about congregational health and mission is that a mission statement should be revisited every three to five years. We are due.

Our Board has appointed people to a Mission and Vision Task Force. It is an intentionally diverse group. We have men and women, a range of ages, and a range of time as members at UFL. The members are Michelle Iwig-Harmon, Bob Burbank, Suzanna Emelio, Ted Wilson, John Brewer, Barb Thompson, Jill and me. We started our work by reading *Holy Conversations*, articles and blog entries and by watching webinars and videos from various sources to get a common understanding of what the current thinking is on mission and vision work. We have begun meeting and will continue to meet throughout this fiscal year. We will not be doing this work in a vacuum, however, and plan to have many opportunities for you all to share your perspectives, hopes and dreams about the big questions: Who are we? Whom do we serve? To whom are we accountable? What is our work in the world? Why are we here?

(note: Suzanna Emelio has since resigned from the Task Force for personal reasons)

This process— like most human endeavors— will not be tidy or quick. In fact, it will be a little messy. This book, titled *The Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making* contains a descriptive diagram for this type of process. Imagine a diamond that is elongated horizontally. The point on the far left is the beginning of the process where the question is posed. As time passes, more perspectives enter the conversation and the diamond enlarges. There are lots of ideas floating around, perhaps some conflict has emerged, and no clear answers to the questions are to be seen. On the diagram, this middle portion is called the "Groan Zone." After some time in the Groan Zone, we will begin to come to agreement on our answers to the big questions. However, we fully expect that we will be in this "Groan Zone" for awhile— and that will require patience from all of us. It is human to want a quick resolution— especially when we feel a little anxiety about what the outcome might be. Please, please, please when you feel that anxiety creep in— when you're feeling impatient for it to be wrapped up tidily, please know that this "Groan Zone" is not only normal, it is necessary. It is in this

messy time that the magic happens. People start to hear each other and be changed by what they hear.

We will need you and your voice. We will need the voices of those not in this room today. Together we can find our answers to the big questions.