“Connection and Justice”
Reflections by Nolan Wright, Kathy O’Laughlin, and Miriam Link-Mullison
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Reflections of a Strategic Planning Committee Member – Nolan Wright

We were called leading up to this service to consider the connections between the spiritual and the practical through the lens of our 2019-24 Strategic Plan process.

Stated simply, the purpose of strategic planning is to set overall goals and develop a plan to achieve them.

If you have spent much time working with me you won’t be surprised to hear that I prefer a longer more complicated conceptualization. Here it goes:

- Strategic planning is an organizational management activity that is used to set priorities, focus energy and resources, strengthen operations, ensure that employees and other stakeholders are working toward common goals, establish agreement around intended outcomes/results, and assess and adjust the organization’s direction in response to a changing environment. It is a disciplined effort that produces fundamental decisions and actions that shape and guide what an organization is, who it serves, what it does, and why it does it, with a focus on the future.
- Effective strategic planning articulates not only where an organization is going and the actions needed to make progress, but also how it will know if it is successful.

Certainly, strategic planning is about process. About being intentional. But in a particular context. We are not a business organization, where decisions can be imposed by those at the top, focusing simply on making a financial profit. We are inherently a community of coequal volunteers, getting things done by agreement, with overlapping but not identical aspirations, sharing some important values.

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

And that has all been evident throughout this particular strategic planning process--as a large percentage of CUF folks actively participated through a retreat last spring and the survey, listening circles, and personal communications this fall, sharing ideas and concerns.

But it is also about a product. A plan. A set of decisions. Typically expressed in words. Set out in a document. And words do matter. They can disappoint, obfuscate, and irritate, or resonate, guide, and inspire. We hope the document we have developed as the result of that process does the latter. Certainly, that has been our intent, those of us working on the Strategic Planning Committee.
It may well seem pompous to try to draw parallels of any kind between a five year plan and the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights, or at the very least inaccurate, but I do see some connections. I will borrow briefly here from a lecture that Justice Brennan gave in 1989 at University College, Oxford: “As Justice Brandeis of the US Supreme Court once said of the American Constitution, it 'is not a strait-jacket. It is a living organism. As such it is capable of growth-of expansion and of adaptation to new conditions. . . .’” William J. Jr. Brennan, “Why have a Bill of Rights,” 9 Oxford J. Legal Stud. 425, 426 (1989).

It has also been suggested that sometimes people have to evolve into the potential represented by the aspirational words they embrace, with new possibilities emerging as their perspectives grow and change.

We offer the proposed 2019-2024 Strategic Plan in a similar vein, not intended as any sort of straitjacket, but serving rather as adaptable guideposts, with room for growth as we continue to evolve. It is the product of deep engagement by many people, and while the process may at times have seemed exhausting and not very exciting, it is important.

**Reflection on Strategic Plan  Kathy O'Laughlin**

The Social Action Committee has used the strategic planning process to think and dream about what Social Justice could mean for CUF. We dreamed of the entire congregation being invested in a social justice priority chosen by the congregation as a whole. At the same time, we were conscious of the ways that many social justice challenges intersect with one another. An example that I recently came across was in a biography of Pauli Murray, an African-American woman who was one of the founders of NOW, the National Organization of Women. She worked in the 60s and 70s on both racial justice and women's rights issues, and was outspoken in confronting the male leaders of the Civil Rights movement when they failed to include women in their leadership, a classic example of the intersectionality we hear about today.

The Social Action Committee recommended that the congregation engage in a process to identify a Social Justice Priority for the next five years. The chosen priority would then be taken up and embodied in many dimensions of congregational life.

So, for example, if the congregation chose to make immigration justice our social justice priority, we might have Sunday services exploring the moral and ethical dimensions of immigration justice. We might choose a book in our book group that explored immigration themes. We might watch movies in our video circle like "Roma" that help us to understand the experience of migrant workers. Maybe Open Minds would choose to explore some of the reasons migrants from Central America are coming to the US despite the unwelcome environment, and how U.S. Policy might better address these issues. Maybe our RE youth and adults would choose to make a service learning trip to the border with the UUSC, to learn about and advocate for immigration justice. Perhaps a group would form specifically with the purpose to read and explore issues of immigrant justice, similar to our Racial Justice Reading Group. Maybe more of us would get involved with the Southern Illinois Immigration Rights Task Force. The possibilities are really only limited by our imaginations!

Immigration Justice is only one example. We could also choose Economic Justice, Racial Justice, Trans Justice, Women's Rights, Universal health care, Education Reform, Prison Ministry. The possibilities are
only limited by our imaginations. The beauty of us all working together, regardless of the chosen priority, is that we build community with one another, and make our values real in the world. For me, that is what our beloved community is all about!

My Reflections on Strategic Planning    Miriam Link-Mullison

I have a confession to make...I like to write strategic plans. For me, a strategic plan is about writing out a road map for turning dreams and possibility into reality.

I have had the unique opportunity over last couple of years to hear your dreams. In fact, I have been a part of over 10 sessions where you shared your hopes for the future of CUF. Here is some of what I heard, “You want CUF to be a driving force for social justice, you dream of turning our property into a shining example of environmental stewardship. You want cozy corners in the commons that draw people together and places on our grounds that invite quiet reflection. You want to be a safe harbor in the storm where the inherent dignity of each of us is honored and loved”.

There were many times as I sat there listening, that I was amazed at the diversity of ideas and we literally have pages and pages of notes. It has been challenging to find the common elements, the points of agreement, the themes of concern, the weak points that need to be addressed. But it is only by having done all this listening and distilling and checking back that we can hope to be successful. You have been the most important part of the process.

As I confessed, I like strategic planning. I have been a part of many planning processes here at the Fellowship but also have contributed to plans directed at public health workforce development, improving health in the state of Illinois, in the region and in Jackson county; plans for statewide associations and for my own agency. I have witnessed plans that changed lives... and those that sat on shelves. The truth I have learned across all these many planning processes, is this, the primary value of the plan is never in the document itself, although it does need to clear and understandable, but in 2 things. First, in bringing people together to dream of the possibilities. As Margaret Wheatley said, “There is no greater power than a community discovering what it cares about...” However from my experience, a plan only has value if we value it, refer to it and use it to guide our future decisions.

It is my dream, as your Board President, that we will do just that...use our plan to make CUF a place that lives up to your dreams and possibilities.