

PREFACE

Why Does FCC Exist? That challenging question was at the genesis of Future Story you are about to read in its original form. Today, we call it The FCC Story.

When we at First Christian Church asked ourselves that question in the summer of 2015, we began a comprehensive 18-month congregation-wide discernment and visioning process that led us to this Story, which was first read during worship on January 22, 2017. And we discovered an answer to our “Why”: ***FCC exists to share the inclusive love of Christ, through serving, welcoming, learning and offering spiritual connection.***

The FCC Story, which envisions our church in the year 2021, has been unfolding slowly but confidently since the day it was first read and received by a grateful congregation. In the following months, the congregation organized around the story’s major themes and chartered teams of volunteers to focus on implementing FCC’s statements of intention and vision as enunciated in The FCC Story.

When you read The FCC Story, you will be amazed by how it has become such a significant part of our culture over the past two years. Indeed, many of our new initiatives were first envisioned in The FCC Story, including Jazz Vespers, XPLOR, expansion of small groups, a fuller embrace of the arts, the offering of our space to community groups, and plans to enhance our sanctuary and fully develop our west wing.

The FCC Story is no longer a “Future” Story; rather it is a reality that we are now living and will continue to live as we move ahead to honor our sacred calling and commitments as First Christian Church.

God is good, indeed!

Pastor Helen Hempfling
January 2019

Introduction

January 22, 2017

Over the past year and at the board's initiative, First Christian Church has undergone a self-assessment process, titled *Strength for Today, Hope for Tomorrow*, designed to help us bring into focus a vision for where God might be calling us over the next five years. The comprehensive process, in which over 100 people participated, included an assessment of our building, two retreats, a number of community-wide interviews, and congregational listening sessions. Rick Morse of Hope Partnership served as our consultant.

There is good news! We have learned that there is rich opportunity for spiritual growth and community engagement. We can also affirm that we have everything that we need to be effective in ministry: a great staff, good facilities, strong financial resources, a gifted and faithful congregation, a sense of purpose, and a deep trust in God's guiding presence.

We also acknowledge some sobering realities: First, the community is changing, and parking is but one of the issues. Second, in the past 10 years, weekly worship attendance has declined and attendance patterns have changed. Third, giving to the general fund has declined, and over 30% of our budget is supported by members over the age of 80. Third, our facility, which mostly sits empty during weekdays, is in a constant state of needed repairs and updates. With current income levels and current building needs, maintaining the 100-year old building is not sustainable. Even as we name these sobering facts, we acknowledge a palpable sense of God's guiding and renewing Spirit whenever we come together for worship, fellowship, and service.

At the closing retreat in May 2016, participants were asked to write a "future story" about FCC that takes into account our current realities and envisions FCC *at its best* in the year 2021. Then, four people (plus Pastor Helen) volunteered to take on the task of writing a single Future Story that weaves together the creative ideas that came out of both retreats. This small team has been meeting regularly since last May.

The Future Story is ambitious, but so is our God! The story captures a sense of what is possible when FCC shapes its life and ministry around the "why" of our existence. Indeed, this process has led us to affirm that **"FCC exists to share Christ's inclusive love, through serving, welcoming, learning, and offering spiritual connection."**

The Future Story you are about to read describes a Friday night about five years from now. While it is written in story form, with fictional dialogue and characters, its vision is real. As you read it, please imagine yourself in the story. More importantly, imagine that someone you know (friend, neighbor, co-worker, loved one) will find their way into this story, and envision them celebrating the fullness of life that comes when one experiences the inclusive love of Christ made known through authentic expressions of Christian community.

First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) of Bloomington, Indiana FUTURE STORY

Presented and Received January 22, 2017

This story is divided into two sections. The first section is a flashback to the year 2016, when we started this process of self-assessment and discernment. The second section is a flash forward to the year 2021 when we check in on the progress we've made living out our story.

Prologue: Year 2016

Once upon a time, there was a Body of Christ known as First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Bloomington, Indiana. They had been on the corner of Kirkwood and Washington for a very long time—190 years! They had a good community reputation for feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, supporting Monroe County United Ministries, and providing offices for Habitat for Humanity.

“FCC,” as they called themselves, was proud of their beautiful sanctuary and their history of strong worship that featured heady preaching and beautiful music. They were quite content.

Over time, however, things changed. FCC had, no doubt, seen lots of change in its day! Its long existence was a testament to the dedication and adaptability of its members—*not to mention, to the glory of God*. But now, as the 190th birthday celebration loomed large, there were new concerns. Church simply wasn't the popular place that it used to be. Many secular causes vied for people's time, attention, and money. Attendance was waning. The 100-year old building required constant repairs. While devotion to God and to mission remained high, they knew that if they hoped to celebrate their 200th birthday, changes would have to happen.

“It may be sinful to say it, but I like us just the way we are,” declared Mabel, a 90-something-year-old matriarch, who had joined

the church in the previous century when she came to Bloomington as a young bride. “Why don't more people come?”

“I don't know,” said Tom, a professional in his 50's who had been attending regularly for the last 10 years. “But I *do* know that we're pouring money into this building and we can't keep this up forever. We need God's guidance to look at our mission priorities, take stock of our resources, and then make a future plan.

“Maybe we should just pull up stakes and move out to one of those new subdivisions,” said Ramona, a no-nonsense, single woman who worked for the City of Bloomington. “What do we have to lose?”

So the discussion ensued and at times, it got rather heated.

‘*Hell, no, we won't go!*’ was George's mantra, left over from his Vietnam protestor days. “We've been on this corner forever. What would the homeless do if we left? We're needed here. The City sure isn't taking care of feeding and housing them!”

Bill and Sue Newcomer chimed in, “We chose this church because it *is* downtown. We want to be part of a church with a distinct calling—one that makes a difference for those who seek food, shelter, a friendly word—or for anyone who simply wants a refuge to rest, capture a

sense of the Divine Presence of Jesus Christ and experience beauty and peace in their lives.”

Overhearing that, Jake and Vanessa Carpenter felt compelled to add their two cents, “Yes, we agree! We like the people at FCC—their genuine friendliness. Everyone is so welcoming!” said Jake.

“We especially like the relationships we’ve built through our involvement with small groups,” said Vanessa. “The friendships I made through Faith Leader endure to this day.”

Jake quickly added, “There are so many different types of people at FCC! Yet we come together as children of God—on equal par—to worship together. People are spiritually equipped here and then encouraged to go into the world to make it a better place, in their own special way. We chose to raise our children in this type of environment.”

Ramona confided, “FCC has changed my life. By joining the choir and the Friday meditation group, I have grown spiritually. I now feel an inner strength—the Holy Spirit within me—that I never knew before coming here.”

To which Mabel reiterated with frustration, “*Amen!* So why don’t more people come? It just burns a hole in my bonnet!”

Tom, also the current board moderator, decided to invite the congregation to participate in a series of sessions to address their future together.

“Our downtown neighborhood is changing,” said Tom. “Heck, the whole world is changing! We need to move along as well, if we hope to survive another 200 years.”

Most people agreed with him and decided to attend the sessions. Tom promised to provide food and drink, too. So, what was there to lose?

Fast forward five years: Year 2021

A guest on the sixth floor of The Graduate Hotel pulls back the curtain of her room and looks out onto Kirkwood Avenue. Across the street is a lovely old, Gothic-style church. She recognizes it. After all, she’s an IU alumna—in town with her husband for IU’s Parents’ Weekend. Their daughter is a sophomore at IU. How can so much time have passed? She remembers walking by that church when *she* was a young student.

She reads the banner hanging outside the church, **Join Us for Jazz Vespers- 8:30 p.m.—First Fridays, following Gallery Walk.** “That sounds interesting,” she says to herself. “Maybe we’ll do that.”

She feels a deep affinity for Bloomington. She’s still hopeful that someday, she and her husband might retire here. She’s not sure what a jazz service is, but it sounds intriguing. Also, she’s curious to see what that church looks like on the inside. It seems to beckon her. They can invite their daughter, too. Maybe she’d like to join them before going out on the town with friends.

Meanwhile, across the street at FCC, Tom was introducing a developer to the pastor, board officers, and trustees. After extensive soul-searching and intense dialogue, the congregation had decided to seek either a developer or an existing group in need of a downtown presence, who would be willing to engage in a long-term lease with FCC; investing *their own* capital to renovate some or all of the building’s west wing. The goal would be for FCC to provide a downtown venue for needed community services in a way that was meaningful and compatible with FCC’s mission and in so doing, create a new revenue stream.

A team of FCC members had conducted a due-diligence review of community needs and

wants. Three potential developers/community partners had been identified and now were providing blueprints of their proposal for the building.

Tom opened the meeting with a prayer. As he prayed aloud, he was overcome with gratitude and he praised God for FCC's hope-filled future. His heart was full of love for all FCC members, who—over the course of 195 years—had embraced faith, courage, and imagination to bring the church to this point in history.

George was in the sanctuary, arranging the new, wooden pew chairs for tonight's jazz vespers. Surprisingly, he had become quite a jazz fan. "How far we've come," he thought. "How far I've come!" George still loved the high church stuff but he was embracing the new stuff, too.

"With the changes to the sanctuary, it's amazing that we can host so many different types of artistic performances that bring glory to God. I knew all along that we were meant to be here, on this corner!"

Taking a quick break, George sat down in one of the cushioned pew chairs, stretched out his legs and surveyed the sanctuary. Afternoon sunlight streamed in and bathed the vast, high-beamed room. With the carpet removed, the refurbished wood floor shone throughout. The magnificent Tree of Life stained glass window remained the commanding work of art that never failed to soothe one's soul as it pointed to the God of all creation. Surely, George thought—and as each FCC church-goer agreed—this *is* holy ground.

Unbeknownst to George, the church organist had slipped up to the balcony, quiet as a church mouse. As she began to practice, George dallied a bit longer, indulging himself in the powerful music and letting his thoughts wander.

Organ music flows now and in a few short hours, a jazz trio will be on the new chancel, filling the room with piano riffs and blue notes. How cool that we can move these chairs around—arrange them this way and that—take in different views of this sacred space, and make things cozy or make things grand! It's a blessing in so many ways—to have the flexibility to accommodate different experiences in the sanctuary, where indeed God's presence is palpable.

And he began recounting all the different goings-on that had taken place just in the last few months in this sacred space: from chamber music, recitals, community choral groups, to poetry readings and liturgical dance; from small groups that meet to reflect on the sermon, discuss a book or organize a mission trip, to mediation groups, and Bible studies.

Maybe, reflected George, that's the best part of FCC: that we've always been open to allowing people the necessary space—figuratively and literally—to explore their faith and develop their own unique way of expressing God's love in the world.

"How's it going with the chairs, George?" called Jordan, one of the XPLOR residents, as he entered the sanctuary.

In 2017, the FCC congregation put their name on the waitlist for the XPLOR Residency Program, an internship sponsored by the National Benevolent Association, the social service arm of the Disciples of Christ denomination. The program was an excellent way of investing in the future of young adults who wanted to explore where their faith might lead them, in terms of vocation and impacting the world around them.

"Hey, there, Jordan! I'm almost finished

rearranging. I was just taking a little hiatus. It's too beautiful in here not to!"

"I'm following up on the shuttle sign-up sheet, which I seem to have temporarily misplaced. Are you by any chance signed up to drive the van this Sunday?" Jordan asked.

"No, not me," responded George. "I think that new fella, Peter somebody, offered to drive the next two Sundays. He told me that he's really been enjoying it; said it's a good way for him to meet people in the church."

"I haven't been here long," said Jordan, "but I can tell what a God-send that van is. I can't imagine what you did without it! Parking around here is not easy, especially at night. The shuttle is great for getting our people back and forth from the 4th Street Parking Garage. It's also become a favorite ministry of quite a few members."

"Yep—we never counted on it taking the City this long to build a new downtown parking garage. That was a smart idea Ramona had a few years ago—to accept the offer Old National Bank made to help us buy the van!" George chuckled.

"Well, the van is working out nicely in the meantime," said Jordan. "Ramona mentioned that there's another meeting with City officials soon about the new parking garage. I must say, I'm learning first-hand that it takes a lot of dedicated stakeholders with a world of patience and a boat-load of persistence to see it through."

"I remember when the City's Growth Policies Plan came out nearly five years ago," said George. "It was good that we organized with other downtown stakeholders and sustained the battle cry for another parking garage. Heck, we were already screaming about the lack of parking *before* The Graduate Hotel was ever

built! Apartment buildings were going up like wildfire all over downtown and none of them offered adequate parking, even for their own tenants."

"I think there's light at the end of the tunnel," responded Jordan. "If we can hang on just a bit longer, I think the Plan Commission will approve the new garage. It will still take a year or so to build, so the shuttle ministry will live on for awhile yet. Honestly, I could see the shuttle ministry continuing and simply shifting to the new garage once it's open. People really enjoy the hospitality of the 'door to door' service. Anyway, George, if you happen to come across that sign-up sheet, please give me a holler! I've got another person who's volunteered to take some shifts."

As Jordan headed downstairs to the XPLOR Residents' quarters, he warmed inside. He'd only been at FCC for a few months, but he knew that the decision to enter XPLOR had been the right one. At age 27, he'd felt at odds about his future. After college, he landed a teaching job in his home state of Idaho. And though he enjoyed teaching, he found himself pulled more and more toward the volunteer work he did in his free time for a local mental health organization.

In preparation for acceptance into the XPLOR Residency Program, FCC completed a rudimentary remodel of some of its lower level classrooms—converting them into a makeshift apartment that the three XPLOR Residents now shared. On top of working 30-hours a week for a social service agency, each resident also spent six hours a week engaged in ministry within the FCC congregation. It was an energizing exchange for all concerned.

So it was that Jordan now hurried eagerly downstairs for the XPLOR Residents' weekly "Friday Sabbath" session, when they met with their FCC spiritual companion, Jake Carpenter.

Fearing he was late for the meeting, Jordan burst into the apartment.

“Hey, guys! Sorry if I kept you waiting. Oh, wait—Jake’s not here yet?”

“He’s running a few minutes late,” said Kelly, who hailed from Burlington, Vermont. Kelly interned for Middle Way House, just a short walk from FCC, at *The Rise*, a housing project for victims of domestic violence.

“I gotta have something to eat so I’m putting together a little snack for us,” said Kirk, the third XPLOR resident of the threesome. Kirk’s internship was with Monroe County United Ministries’ Food Pantry.

“Surprise, surprise! Man, you’re in a perpetual state of hunger!” Jordan teased Kirk, who *did* have a healthy appetite.

“Knock, knock! Sorry I’m late!”

“Come in, Jake,” Jordan said as he held the door open. Jake Carpenter was thrilled to be serving as the spiritual companion to the XPLOR Residents. Since coming to FCC six years ago, he and his wife, Vanessa, felt that their faith had deepened exponentially. They had chosen FCC because of its compassion and inclusivity and embraced its enthusiasm for building up the Body of Christ.

From the minute they joined FCC, the Carpenters had been involved with FCC’s youth program and also with the Interfaith Winter Shelter. But by the 2017-18 winter season, when Wheeler Mission Ministries began housing the Interfaith Winter Shelter, the need for church teams to staff it lessened considerably. He and Vanessa still volunteered with a FCC crew once a month, November through March, but new opportunities for service had presented themselves. Vanessa now devoted much of her free time leading a class for all ages on different

spiritual practices, while Jake focused on the XPLOR Residents Program.

Jake’s role was to meet weekly with the XPLOR Residents for honest and open conversation. He was there to offer them guidance about challenges they might be experiencing in adjusting to their communal living situation or in their respective jobs in Bloomington’s nonprofit sector. He also was a sounding board as the residents sought discernment for the intersection of faith and career and served as their spiritual counselor during their FCC residency.

The foursome had chosen Fridays at 4 o’clock as their meeting time. It was an opportunity to “inhale and exhale with the Holy Spirit; a Divine appointment,” as Jake liked to say and they all looked forward to this hour of sharing. On the first Friday of each month, it had become their custom to stroll Bloomington’s Gallery Walk together, after their meeting. They enjoyed seeing the art work and it often brought to their attention potential artists whose work FCC might want to feature in their gallery space.

The four visited several galleries, but soon Jake realized the time. “It’s almost 8 o’clock now,” he said.

Kirk popped an appetizer from the gallery’s nice spread of hors d’oeuvres into his mouth and grinned sheepishly. The others rolled their eyes and smiled, then nodded in agreement as they left and headed up Kirkwood together, toward FCC.

It was 8:15 p.m. and the candlelight danced in the sanctuary as people began arriving for jazz vespers. Bill and Sue Newcomer were stationed in the narthex as greeters.

“Welcome to First Christian Church!” said Sue, as she handed out bulletins to a family of three.

She had watched them come across the street from The Graduate Hotel. “We’re glad you’re here!”

“Thank you!” responded the mother. “I’ve always been curious about this church but it’s taken me 30 years to venture in.”

The daughter laughed and said, “I’ve been here a couple of times, Mom. My friend T.J. had some of his artwork displayed here so I came to see the exhibit. And my roommate, Mary Jo, sings with an IU ensemble that performs here occasionally. Actually, she and I have been thinking about trying out the Sunday worship service.”

The father smiled and said, “It’s a beautiful space. Maybe we’ll come over for worship on Sunday morning before we head home.”

“We hope you will!” said Sue enthusiastically. “Our traditional Sunday morning worship service begins at 10 a.m., but the sanctuary opens at 8:30 a.m. for meditation and communion. And by the way, immediately following tonight’s jazz vespers, please join us for *Meet the Musicians*, just through those doors and to the right, in the Chapel Gathering Space.”

Bill Newcomer added, “Yes, it’s good to hear from the musicians themselves—about the musical projects they’re working on, and how they interpret God in their music. I think you’d enjoy it!”

“We’ll probably see you in there, then. Thanks again,” said the father as they moved into the sanctuary to be seated in the pew chairs that encircled the musicians.

It was nearly 10 o’clock that night when Ramona and George finished picking-up after the vesper service. Ramona couldn’t keep from humming the simple melody of one of the

songs they’d sung. The service had been well attended. Outside, Kirkwood Avenue buzzed with activity. Definitely, FCC was drawing in all kinds of people and sending them back out into the world, fuller, richer, and better for their experience with the Sacred.

Ramona smiled a bittersweet smile as she thought about her old friend, Mabel.

I wish you could’ve seen it tonight, Mabel. More and more people are coming and connecting here with Christ. I wish you could’ve been here. On second thought, I’m sure you were!

“I think that’s it,” called out George as he approached Ramona from the other end of the sanctuary. “Hey, you okay? Is there a little mist in those eyes?”

“Oh, I’m good, George. Really, it’s all good!”

After a pause, George spoke, “Okay, then,” he said quietly and he gave her a gentle smile and nodded. Then all went dark as he hit the final light switch and they made their way outside.

So it was, that with their eyes on God, the Body of Christ known as First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), lived boldly and purposefully into a robust future, on the corner of Kirkwood and Washington in downtown Bloomington, Indiana.

Future Story Writers: Terry Daugherty, Amy Hoover, Craig Paiement, Betsy Watson, who, along with Pastor Helen, give thanks for the faithful and discerning work of the congregation and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.