

# **Holy Conversations – Divining Our Future Final Report**

## **Reawakening**

**April 2006**

The Holy Conversations Committee

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Dear Friends:

The Holy Conversations Committee is very pleased to offer you our final report, *Reawakening*, describing a new vision for our Church. While this document has been thoughtfully prepared by a small group within our congregation, it is important to realize that it really represents the “distillation” of countless hours of conversation and prayer among us all, as members of our faith community.

In 2004, the Holy Conversations committee was given a charge to embark on a process to help clarify our spiritual identity, purpose and call. In reality, this initiative began much earlier. The Deacons and the Ministry Team have wrestled for some time with the realization that mainline protestant churches, including ours, are facing significant challenges in an increasingly secular world. Churches like ours are challenged to grow membership and maintain financial health as we compete for our members’ time and energy in an increasingly busy world. Fortunately, our Church is relatively healthy by many measures and it is from this solid foundation that the Deacons and the Ministry team elected to move forward with the Holy Conversations process. The process has been designed to discern a new vision that will provide new sources of energy and enthusiasm for our programs, ministries and community.

It is the feeling of our Holy Conversations committee that we were given a charge by our “institution,” and we are returning with a vision of our church as a “community.” To us, this represents a meaningful transformation, or perhaps even a paradigm shift. We believe that focusing our energies into strengthening the bonds of our faith community, through a variety of means, will enhance the meaningfulness of our overall experience together and our own spiritual growth.

As you will see from reading this report, our vision is not a statement about “making the institution better.” Our Church is a fine institution, complete with abundant programs, ministries, operations and facilities. With help from all of us doing a lot to support the institution, it runs very smoothly. Our suggestion for a new vision, however, relies less on the well-being of our institution and more on the strength and vitality that arises from a well-connected community. Our vision is about creating opportunities to discover God reflected in each other, to discern what God is calling us to be and do as a true faith community. We are talking about a community that is grounded in “being,” not “doing.” We believe that our ‘doing’ is better grown out of a profound sense of being, community, centeredness and faith. If we intentionally explore ways to deepen our faith, nurture our souls and develop a community that is better connected to God and one another, the “doing” will be invigorating, not draining. We will have fostered a source of energy that we crave so much today. If we get this right, the doing will feel good; it will be fulfilling and rewarding and further deepen our faith.

If the broader congregation and Church leadership share our vision, then changes to our “institution,” including our programs, ministries, etc. are very likely, if not inevitable. These will emerge as we begin to live into our new vision. Once we begin moving down some new paths in new ways, we believe it is likely that these changes will naturally

evolve from that which we already have in place. Taken in this context, then, this report doesn't represent an end, but a beginning. In fact, as we describe in our report, we think we have already begun!

We are pleased to have been a part of this process and truly appreciate the opportunity to have been in closer conversation with you, the members of our community. We realize that this report contains a lot to digest and ponder and we look forward to feedback and discussion. We also recognize that our congregation is quite diverse and that in a spiritual context, we are all in different places. Our hope is that within our vision, there is something for everyone. We invite you to join us as we continue our growth together as a faith community.

Marc Thompson,  
Head Deacon and member of the Holy Conversations Committee

Hebrews 11: 1

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,  
the conviction of things not seen.”

We have been on an amazing Holy Conversations journey together — a holy journey of inquiry about our understanding of our identity as a faith community, our sense of purpose, and our relationship with God. Almost two years ago our HC group was charged by the church to listen to God and to the congregation, to discern a new vision for our life together as an intentional faith community. We began by asking “Who are we now?” and continued to consider “What is God calling us to be or to do?” Many of you have traveled the journey with us and joined us at one or more of our group explorations:

- The kickoff event in April 2004 with Alice Mann, our Holy Conversations guide
- The U.S. Congregational Life survey in Fall 2004, completed by 180 members
- Myriad “Who are we now?” discussions, encompassing 120 participants, including:
  - The luncheon and roundtable discussions with 80 participants in Chidley Hall in March 2005
  - Discussions in April and May 2005 with 20-25 groups including each Commission and various small groups such as Ruth Group, Choir, Bible study, and Touchstones
- The Life Deacons’ Palm Sunday breakfast with speaker Alice Mann in March 2005
- The Deacons’ weekend retreat in the Fall of 2005 that centered on Holy Conversations themes and ideas
- Marcus Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity* book discussion groups in October and November 2005, in which 80-100 individuals participated
- The Stone Soup lunch celebration in November 2005, where Alice Mann and the HC committee presented key themes from the Borg discussion groups to 200 attendees
- The World Café event in January 2006, where 60-70 participants discussed, “The Future of our Spiritual Community: What Is God Calling Us To Be and To Do?”

In the HC committee and in the group conversations throughout the process, a rich offering of ideas has been ‘harvested’ and prayerfully considered. Drawing on all of the conversations along the way, we have developed a vision that draws upon our strengths and challenges us to develop and deepen our experience together.

To develop the vision, we did not simply compile a catalog of all we heard. We prayed to God to inspire and guide us. We tried to distill the essence of what we heard. We tried to discern the deeper meaning behind all of the ideas. We envisioned possibilities. We listened to the congregation and we tried hard to listen to God in our midst, to hear, see, and feel where God might be leading us. What we heard was beautiful; we are proud and humbled to share it with the congregation in this report.

### ***Vision of Our Future:***

***We are an intentional Christian faith community, and we know ourselves to be children of a loving God. Therefore we:***

- ***Seek to continually deepen our spiritual journey - to cultivate faith both at our core and expressed in our daily activities in the world.***
- ***Yearn for true community - to know ourselves and one another, and through those relationships, the Holy Spirit.***

- ***Strive to live a committed Christian life — to follow Christ’s example with our whole selves.***

***Seek to continually deepen our spiritual journey.***

While there is much to celebrate in the faith life of our congregation, we believe that God beckons us to continue to explore and deepen our faith over the entire arc of our lives — both as individuals and also as a church. Our future is about helping each other find an intentional path, a faithful process for our spiritual development — no matter where we are starting from and no matter how many varied paths we travel to get from awareness, to intention, to practice, to deepening.

At some junctures in our lives, this may mean seeking greater challenges, stretching ourselves beyond our known comforts. It may mean finding new insight through reflection and study, or quieting our turmoil through meditation and prayer. Sometimes it may mean putting aside our ambitions in order to serve others, or it may simply mean surrendering to worship. For all of us, our needs and capacities for growth continue to evolve and change over the course of our lifetimes.

*In the envisioned future, we help each other go to a continually deeper level in our personal explorations and journeys through all phases of our lives. We strive to "walk in the ways of the Lord, known and to be made known". Along the way, we explore our own faith, and yes, our doubts, in all of our life experiences and struggles, both within church life and in our everyday activities. We learn to deepen our practice of faith by sharing of ourselves and by listening and learning from others.*

***Yearn for true community.***

Ours is a congregation that yearns for true community. We long to know ourselves and one another better. We know deep in our hearts that by connecting with one another and our own true selves we will also connect with God and the Holy Spirit. It is also true that as we come to know God, we discover ourselves and one another. We believe this yearning for community and connection with God and with one another is a gift from God.

We want to continually refresh that divinely inspired yearning. We want to remain perpetually responsive to our desire to make connections with God and with each other. To that end, we practice our faith together. We rely on each other’s strengths and support one another’s needs. We laugh with those who laugh, and weep with those who weep. We worship together in a variety of ways, venues, and styles. We renew ourselves and each other through our shared experiences and by connecting as a community with God, Christ and the Holy Spirit.

*In the envisioned future, each member feels they are an active and integral participant in a loving community. We provide opportunities for people to learn to know themselves better – to discern their gifts and talents, to find themselves and their calling. Like the swimmer that dares to trust the buoyancy of the water, so too, we want our members to feel the buoyancy of our congregation’s and God’s loving embrace.*

***Strive to live a committed Christian life.***

We know the Christian journey is one of surrender to God's grace and love, and that the path of surrender leads to joy. God calls each of us to live faithfully in that grace and love over the full course of our lives. God accepts us as we are AND invites and challenges us to be more: to enter into a covenant of mutual devotion. In the same way, Christ invites us to follow his example, challenges us to fully live the two great commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" and "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

We also know that any life-long commitment — like marriage — gains much of its meaning from the daily practice of living into that commitment. Both compassion and determination are needed, in equal measure. We celebrate that we all come from different starting points and that we all have different gifts, and so each of us will find a different path to God's heart. Therefore we want to strive as individuals to dedicate ourselves to living fully in our Christian faith — in our individual spiritual explorations, in our family and professional lives, and also in our church community.

*In the envisioned future, our Christian faith gives form to everything we do, because God is the wellspring of our lives. We each strive to understand how Christ's example of faithful surrender applies to our daily experiences, we commit ourselves to living as Christ's disciples, and we support and encourage one another along the way. We freely exercise whatever means we have each been given to uplift one another. By living fully in this loving relationship, we experience the transforming, eternal presence of God, and the joy of daily renewal in God's infinite grace.*

**Vision into Action**

In living out this beautiful, inspiring, and admittedly, enormously challenging vision, we see five verbs of our Christian faith as the keys to incarnating the vision: **share, learn, pray, worship** and **serve**. These verbs represent both the 'doing' and the 'being' of our faith, across all of our many perspectives and experiences.

We don't need to live into this vision for God's benefit; we need to live into it for our own spiritual well-being.

By sharing, learning, praying, worshipping and serving together, we follow Christ's example. We allow God to create in us larger, more meaningful, and more vital lives, able to achieve greater value and impact in the world. We believe this is both the promise we have been granted as individual Christians, and the future of our life together as a church.

## Reawakening to Our True Selves

One of the participants at the HC world café event in January 2006 observed that in our congregation there is a “sense of spiritual energy, not clearly channeled at this time, but there nonetheless.”

As we have listened to one another’s struggles, yearnings and hopes over the last two years, we have been struck by the degree to which our experience here in FCC reflects broader changes taking place in our culture, our world, and in churches like ours.

In his book, Traveling Together, minister and author Jeffrey Jones could have been speaking directly to us:

*A church whose identity and function were shaped by one world is finding it increasingly difficult to remain relevant in the new world that is now emerging... It misses the deep spiritual yearning of countless people of all ages... It simply doesn't recognize the power of Christ to attract, transform, and empower. It is afraid to let that power loose in its own life and through it into the community. When confronted by a person who is seeking to grow in relationship with Christ, all it knows to do is put that person on a committee.*

This sounds very much like our context when we started this visioning process. Our leadership was starting to feel tired, drained. Many members were actively involved on committees; they worked hard, but didn’t always experience spiritual growth or renewal. To our surprise and dismay, we were starting to feel that our participation in our church community was becoming another item on the ‘to do’ list, rather than a source of rejuvenation and joy.

The HC team was asked to undertake a vision exploration, to seek a path for our congregation to find new energy, focus and purpose in our ministry to one another and to the world around us. We were all asked to hear ‘God ... still speaking’ to us.

Just as Jeffrey Jones asks in his book, the Holy Conversations process has led us to ask ourselves and each other:

*“What if [the church] ordered its life in such a way that everything it did helped people grow in their relationship with Christ and live out the reality of that relationship in all their relationships?”*

What if we started to “recognize the power of Christ to attract, transform, and empower.”? What if we learned to “let that power loose in its [our] own life and through it into the community.”?

We see this as a profoundly challenging and unsettling idea, and yet we also recognize in it the divine channel our spiritual energy seeks, and the answer to our souls’ deepest desires.

The HC team believes that this is exactly the invitation we hear God making to us. We have heard consistently repeated echoes and affirmations of this invitation in conversations with our church members.

We feel one another's restless eagerness for growth and nourishment, and we perceive this as a sign that we are ready for a ***reawakening to our true selves***. A *reawakening* because we have been awake before, we have strengths to draw upon, and we can tap into the energy that we know exists in our deep reservoirs. *Our true selves* because, in drawing ourselves closer to God and to one another, we will find our way to becoming the best and truest versions of ourselves as children of God.

### **Ideas and Examples for Embodying the Vision**

With the vision statements in mind, we have developed ideas and examples of the kinds of things we imagine will help us live into this vision. We hope these ideas will help us become more grounded in 'being', so that our 'doing' springs from a profound sense of community, centeredness and faith. These suggestions represent possibilities that may help us embody the vision as the congregation moves forward renewed. We should feel free to let go of some of our practices as we grow into new traditions.

Embedded in each of these suggestions and examples is the notion that we are called to care for our members over the entire span of their lives. As we begin to live into our vision, we hope that we will continually find ways to sustain, nourish, develop, hold, heal, comfort and challenge our members through every life stage.

- **Expand small groups in a large way, for both faith development and community building.**

The small group experience is cherished by our congregation. Many feel that some of our best explorations of faith happen in small groups. In small groups, we learn, share, pray and 'just be' together. We envision expanding our small group and adult education offerings so that in the future a vast majority of the congregation is involved in some sort of small group activity.

These are a sampling of the many wonderful ideas that have been offered for small group activities:

- Fun and fellowship through interest groups, such as dancing, bowling, walking, yoga, music, symphony or Fenway outings, dining (dine with nine), wine tasting
- Travel: Holy Land, choir tours, church exchange
- Mini-courses, such as Bible 101, Intro to UCC, Faith Issues 101, Church Finances 101
- Annual or semi-annual small group discussions on specific topics or ministries — for example, March Madness, Book discussions, Unwrapping Your Gifts, Called to Care, Retreats
- Men's group
- Groups formed around specific life stages, such as professional support, parenting, widowhood, singles, divorce, addiction, grieving, etc.

- **Consider multiple worship formats, keeping what is dear and exploring new possibilities.**

There is so much that we love about our Sunday morning worship, but there are also many new things we want to try. We are open to the possibility of deepening the richness of our experience. We also want to allow those who are called to teach church school the chance to worship with the church community.

Some of the ideas that have been imagined are:

- A combined service for adults and children, with everyone going to Sunday school after (or before) service
- Two Sunday morning services — one early, one later — and Sunday school for adults and children in between
- Meditative service in the chapel once a week or once a month, on a week night or Sunday afternoon or evening, with no sermon or choir, but possibly with devotional/poetry reading, scripture reading, candle lighting, prayers silent or spoken
- Jazz/pop service, possibly geared toward youth or young families
- Service(s) on weekdays for those who can't participate on weekends

- **Coordinate a large, multi-year, intergenerational, integrated mission project.**

Mission and service — both within and outside our church — are tremendous strengths of our congregation. We think a long-term, integrated, church-wide mission project will focus our energy and build on our strengths. We envision a mission that engages the hearts and hands of the congregation, one that involves a variety of activities coordinated around a central theme. By focusing our energies, we aspire to make a greater impact on the world around us. Through this active service we believe we will all be enriched — our faith can both be expressed and deepened. We envision all ages involved in this service mission and dare to hope that it will harness our collective passions.

Possibilities include:

- Build on our past and current mission trips and experiences such as the trip to the Navajo in New Mexico, Rio Chiquito in Honduras South America, and New Orleans
- Adopt a sister church
- Develop a central theme such as feeding the hungry or sheltering the homeless

- **Enhance resources and support for children, teens and the confirmation program.**

The children and youth component of the education commission is already hard at work, trying to create more of a feeling of community within the church school and creating a culture where the children and teens are more visible to and connected with the larger congregation. This endeavor springs from the same well of yearning for closer community that permeates the whole congregation. We envision sustaining, nourishing, developing, holding, healing, comforting and challenging our youngest members — those who are at the beginning of the arc of their lives — and

helping them make the transition from childhood into adulthood with the consistent support of the congregation and the assurance of God’s love.

• **Help members fully understand faithful stewardship and the financial future of our church.**

In the envisioned future, we hope to be fully sustained by the gifts of our congregation — gifts of time, talent, energy, and money. We believe a spirit of giving comes from love of both God and the church and from an understanding of how our time, talents and money are used. Possibilities for helping the congregation become more aware of our financial context are:

- Run a workshop on faithful stewardship and the financial future of our church
- Re-launch the ‘language of giving’ writing initiative
- Hold a discussion group on the meaning of stewardship
- Offer a Church Finances 101 adult education session

• **Reassess alignment of resources including deacon responsibilities, functions of staff, commissions, volunteers, and facilities.**

As we begin to live into the vision, it may involve reassessing how our resources are allocated. We may want to focus our energies and talents in one area or another. We may want to look at how the Deacons can focus their energies on spiritual life. Perhaps lay and clergy roles might become more fluid. As the vision becomes reality, realignment will likely occur and we can use the vision as a lens and benchmark to consider the possibilities as we move forward together.

**In addition to the main ideas described above, we have brainstormed additional ideas for consideration. They reflect and honor the many ideas that have been shared along the way, and we hope further discussion will seed new creativity as we continue our Holy Conversations into the future. They are possibilities for the future and we hope they will help us shift our focus from doing to being, to help us ‘be differently’ rather than ‘do more’.**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Address health/sexuality issues with youth in a faith context</li> <li>• Alternative forms of prayer – nature walks, moving meditation, yoga</li> <li>• Church workday</li> <li>• Create quiet space for serenity and meditation</li> <li>• Create a prayer chain</li> <li>• Develop or acquire a faith development curriculum</li> <li>• Distribute favorite devotions, hymns, etc.</li> <li>• Expand Health Ministry</li> <li>• Find ways to be more visible in the community and in the news</li> <li>• Godparents for adults</li> <li>• Expand lay visitation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reinstate new member sponsors</li> <li>• Devotional emails/blogs</li> <li>• Prayer and healing services</li> <li>• Prayer lessons</li> <li>• Provide space for silence, rest and reflection</li> <li>• Retreats — all-church, annual</li> <li>• Offerings of ‘service’ in the offering plate</li> <li>• Share ideas of faithful stewardship</li> <li>• Sharing what Church means to us</li> <li>• Short meditation at commission meetings</li> <li>• “Stephen” ministry</li> <li>• Support and nourish church leaders</li> <li>• Synergize and collaborate with other churches</li> <li>• “This I Believe” video</li> </ul>
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**The Process Has Already Begun**

The beauty of the Holy Conversations process is that change, deepening and development have already begun in our midst. The ripple effects of our structured Holy Conversations have had a significant impact and can be seen in many exciting and appealing new initiatives. All of the conversations, including those by email, in the parking lot and on walks, have helped us generate energy, ideas, and spiritual friends who were willing to champion new practices and activities with us. Some of the new ways we've already begun sharing, praying, learning, and developing community include:

- Marcus Borg's Heart of Christianity book discussion groups
- Formation of the Worship Committee
- Renewed commitment to our Leadership commission and a dedicated group of commission members
- Christian Education initiatives and visioning, including children's worship, consideration of the Journey to Adulthood teen program, and new Adult Ed opportunities
- New Outreach initiatives including the New Orleans mission trip and Offering of Letters
- Formation of a Men's group
- Deep discussion regarding our personal faith and congregational purpose

### **Our Future Together**

This vision report is intended to serve as a fluid medium to continue our Holy Conversations together. It is not a covenant, creed or edict. We offer it as a living, breathing statement of our highest hopes and aspirations, to be discussed, developed, and revisited as we continue to grow together.

Once the Deacons and church leadership have absorbed, embraced and confirmed the vision, we recommend that it be used as widely as possible to actively promote further conversation within and between the congregation, HC committee members, church leadership, commissions and staff throughout the spring. The objective of these activities in the spring is to encourage further communicating, processing, absorbing, and understanding of the vision while it is still freshly formed.

We hope all FCC members and groups will use this report to think about how our individual lives may change, how church practices may change, and how we can truly become a connected community grounded in 'being' so that our 'doing' grows out of a profound centeredness based on Christian love, faith, and compassion.

Our next steps are to continue and expand the process across all aspects of our FCC community. We have provided suggestions to trigger more ideas, and to energize the congregation. Changes to current structure, programs and ministries are inevitable. It is appropriate — and we need to take the time — to make a thoughtful transition. As we proceed, we are looking for evolution, not revolution: a new chapter in our continued journey together.

All this means change. It means challenge. Frederick Buechner said "Faith is a journey without maps". We will need to have faith as we navigate changes and challenges together. We believe that our shared destination, and the traveling together, will be so fulfilling, so enriching, so life affirming, that we will look back and say, "Wasn't it wonderful when we started on a new journey, when we clarified our sense of call?"

As Denise Levertov says in her poem The Avowal:

*As swimmers dare  
to lie face to the sky  
and water bears them,  
as hawks rest upon air  
and air sustains them,  
so would I learn to attain  
freefall, and float  
into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,  
knowing no effort earns  
that all-surrounding grace.*

We begin with a foundation of a strong, committed, faithful congregation. We believe in the transforming power of Christ's love, and we are called to move together into the possibility of development and deepening. We believe that this faithful leap into the Divine is God's hope and blessing for all of us.

The Holy Conversations Committee

Anne Hoenicke, Debbie Johnston, Kris Montgomery, Doug Taylor, Marc Thompson, Skip Waterbury, Carol Weir, David Weir, Julianne Zimmerman