

St. Lucas UCC Future Story

November 17, 2013

Background

What is a Future Story?

The Future Story is a high level view of what St. Lucas will look like, feel like and be like 5 – 7 years from now. The Future Story does not contain many specifics and will not contain final decisions. It provides a glimpse into the general direction God calls for us as we move forward into a successful future.

What input was used to write our Future Story?

The congregation was invited to join a Visioning Triad, where groups of three members could prayerfully consider what God is calling St. Lucas to be in the years ahead. Over 50 triads met for 10 sessions over a 4 month period, sending reports to our visioning mentor, Dick Hamm, after each session. For members who could not participate in formal triads, Dick Hamm hosted one hour and three hour visioning workshops to collect additional input. Dick Hamm also received letters and emails from our congregation. Over 200 pages of anonymous comments were compiled by Dick Hamm for the Vision Team to review. From this input, the Vision Team was able to clearly identify and discern several major themes which were used to build our Future Story.

What about other input from our Vision Triads?

The Vision Team also noted several good ideas and comments from individual triads that weren't major themes for a majority of our triads. Many of these specific ideas and input are very valuable and will be considered for future steps in the visioning process.

How will we use the Future Story?

The Future Story serves as a roadmap to help St. Lucas grow and thrive in the years ahead. The Future story will also be used by the Search Committee to complete the St. Lucas UCC profile.

What are the next steps?

We are building a 5 – 7 year plan for St. Lucas. The Future Story will be used as a guide to develop a Strategic Plan and Action Plan. The congregation will have the opportunity to provide additional input as we build the Strategic Plan and Action Plan.

Introduction

The Future Story is presented to St. Lucas in the form of a skit. We take you to the year 2018, where we observe a casual encounter among friends in a local coffee shop. Two are members of St. Lucas and the third is looking for a new church home...

P: ...So that's why I'm leaving my church, after everything that's happened, we just decided it was time to move on.

L: I'm really sorry to hear that, are you sure you're ready to take that step?

P: I think we are, we've prayed about it and discussed it as a family. I think we're going to start looking at churches around our neighborhood. To be honest, I'm not sure where to begin.

L: I think I do. Why doesn't your family join my family and visit our church, St. Lucas UCC, this Sunday. We have such a strong community and offer so many opportunities for visitors and members alike. What do you think?

P: St. Lucas UCC... now that you mentioned it, I think I saw a quick blurb online mentioning an event that you have coming up this month. I'm a little nervous about jumping in with a new church. What's it like anyway?

L: At St. Lucas, we talk about our values and purpose with five core words: Worship, Mission, Education, Evangelism, and Fellowship. These five words define the goals our church strives to achieve: providing people with opportunities to worship, leading mission programming to do the work of God, developing Christian education to deepen our faith and personal growth, inviting others to join us through evangelism to fuel our church's future; and finally, building the family of God through nurturing fellowship.

P: Sounds like a lot of nice words put together, but what are you doing to actually achieve these goals?

L: We center our efforts on a yearly church theme most often rooted in a Bible verse. The message in the verse we select for the year helps give guidance to nearly everything we do from worship to programming to mission work. For example, our theme this year is based on 1 Peter 4:10, *Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms.*

Of course, it's not like we reinvent the wheel every year. There are many consistencies year after year; after all, it would practically be blasphemy to stop the annual Fish Fry. The scripture theme helps renew our efforts every year and gives us an all-church purpose that unites us across generations and interests.

P: Sounds kind of neat really. What else does St. Lucas value?

L: It's important to our congregation that everyone has a place they can go to worship that feels like home; like they belong. We've carefully designed each of our worship services to have a consistent message; however, the message is delivered uniquely depending on the service you attend. That way, no matter how you want to celebrate God or reflect upon God's message, you can find a fulfilling way to worship at St. Lucas.

P: That's interesting. You know us though; we'll need to attend the best service for families. I want to be able to send the kids to a Sunday school program.

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L: You know, families really don't have to choose a certain service at St. Lucas. Both of our services on Sunday offer children's programming. We actually have three services: a Saturday evening Peace service, a Sunday morning Love service followed by a Sunday morning Joy service.

P: Whoa, whoa, Peace, Joy, Love... what is this Woodstock?

L: Well it's more original than naming our services by the time they happen to meet! It was motivated by the idea to use the Advent Wreath as inspiration for our worship service names. The wreath is symbolic that Christ in the Trinity is the center of each of our services at St. Lucas just as the Christ candle is in the middle of the Advent Wreath.

P: That's actually quite lovely. So which one do families attend?

L: Families tend to mix it up each week. My family sometimes goes to the Love service because the kids will have an afternoon game, but if we choose to sleep in, we can attend the later Joy service. It's nice to attend a different style of worship every so often too. Our youth are often given opportunities to be involved in our worship service--so instead of attending Sunday school they stay in the sanctuary and help facilitate different parts of the service. We even have opportunities for youth members to serve on committees throughout the church. We know our youth are an important part of our church today and an equally important part of our future.

P: I like all the youth opportunities! And that's nice that you don't necessarily see the same people at every service. Sometimes churches have a tendency to become segregated based on the services different groups or even different generations attend, don't you think?

L: It's been a while since that has been a problem at St. Lucas. You see, we learned to appreciate the diversity of services that St. Lucas has to offer. Many members will make a point to visit a service time they haven't been to in a few weeks simply to see other members they've missed or take the opportunity to meet new faces. It's sort of a natural occurrence that we get out of our "comfort zone" or routine and do something different once in a while.

P: Is there a variety of ages at your church?

L: You bet – we cover every generation at St. Lucas! And it's one of the things we pride ourselves on. Even better, no matter which service you go to, you will find all generations represented. We have several events throughout the year that encourage interaction across all age groups as well. We just celebrated the 5 year anniversary of the "All Church Campout" on our athletic fields. Every generation of our church played a part. Younger families pitched tents and helped set up the event, our Boomers club organized snacks and grilled burgers, our 20+/- group and youth groups sponsored games with the children, and some of our senior members stayed late for s'mores and storytelling. This is just one example of how we celebrate our multi-generational church family.

[Man enters scene]

L & J exchange greetings

L: John, I want you to meet my friend Pam. I was just telling her all about St. Lucas actually, her family is looking for a new church.

J: Well I certainly hope to see you at St. Lucas this Sunday – what were you discussing?

P: Lauren just finished telling me all about your different church-wide events. They all sound like a lot of fun. Did you really stay the night in a tent?

J: No, I snuck out after the s' mores. Camping isn't exactly my forte, but I didn't want to miss the earlier evening activities. It's important for members my age to be present and engaged. We're the ones that have built the foundation after all – no seriously, some of us literally helped build the church...but we also need to pass the torch, teach younger generations how to take the lead. So now, I mostly come for the food.

L: That's not true, a few years ago John and I served on an extremely important team together that involved a Visioning Process over the course of several months and engaged over 150 members in designing a strategic future plan for our church.

J: I was really encouraged with how seriously the congregation took the process. We met in small groups for a number of months and had prayerful discussion about what was working at St. Lucas and where we had room for improvement.

L: We're lucky to have seasoned members of our church who act as mentors to the rest of us: guiding and encouraging our leadership, sharing their wisdom, and encouraging younger generations to make decisions that are in the best interest of St. Lucas.

P: So how do you come up with the different ideas for programs and the roles that members play?

J: Anyone can suggest ideas at St. Lucas, whether it's for a church-wide event or a new social group, or a topic for next month's adult education series. We like people to know their "voice" matters.

P: You know, that was a big problem at my last church. There was poor communication, lack of transparency, people arguing for the sake of arguing, it became such a negative environment.

J: I feel for you, we've been there before at St. Lucas UCC and we've had to work through it as a family. The good news is you can get past it!

L: Listen, you can't be one thousand people strong and not have differences of opinion. However, we know that differences can make us stronger and we've got several ways to make sure we know the "pulse of the people" so to speak; whether it's through our "Know Your Council" forums, or our frequent congregational meetings or even approaching a council member during social hour. All we ask is that everyone respect each other's opinions and don't do anything anonymously. We pride ourselves on talking "to" each other; not "about" each other.

J: It used to be that there were church members who were "protective of their turf" but we found that only served to cause divisiveness.

L: So we try to make every aspect of church life transparent and open to everyone. When communication is open, there's no one feeling left out or that their opinion doesn't matter. And you know what? We're one thousand people strong every weekend. Just five years ago, there were only 500 people consistently coming to worship. So what we're doing really works.

P: Hmm... sounds almost too good to be true. At our church, we really struggled to make friends. That's partly why we're ready to move on; it just felt like no one reached out to us or cared if we were there.

J: Well I'm hoping you won't mind experiencing the opposite of that at St. Lucas because we try not to let anyone slip through the cracks. No matter which worship service you attend, you will see people making a point to get to know strangers.

L: People are quick to introduce themselves to new faces at St. Lucas UCC. We aren't one of those churches where everyone sits in the same seat every Sunday. We move around; we talk a lot; we ask you questions. At the end of the day, we'd really love to see you return so we try to make visitors feel welcome! Each service lends us the ability to do that differently, but you won't be overlooked at St. Lucas and if you're not there the following week someone will probably notice.

P: Wow, how do you guys do it? I mean, how do you keep such a good thing going?

L: It's been a collective church effort for sure. We had to redesign how we thought about our church culture and our future. We had to learn how to grow and change effectively and strategically.

J: You know change isn't something I'm necessarily good at. Sometimes I have a hard time understanding how change can be a positive thing, but it helps that while trying to move forward and evolve, the history of our church is still revered. St. Lucas is the place it is because of its history. We still do a lot of work to preserve and celebrate the historical achievements of our church. For example, I just finished taping an "Oral History" session for our video series on the website promoting the heritage of our church. I think it's practically gone viral by now!

P: How have you managed to convince so many different generations and types of people to be engaged and involved, while also sharing the same direction and purpose?

L: It has a lot to do with our attitudes. We appreciate the fact that we are multi-generational and we celebrate that you can interact with people from all walks of life at our church. Everyone is welcome at St. Lucas and, especially as a UCC congregation, we make great efforts to be all-inclusive. We look at our worship style diversity as a real strength. It's an opportunity to serve more people. Sure, we've had bumps in the road and will have more I'm sure, but when we have a problem at our church we tackle that problem head on as a congregation.

J: Often we get together in small groups to prayerfully discuss our issues. These small group conversations help us recognize where God is calling St. Lucas UCC.

P: It must take a huge amount of lay leadership; I bet you guys really suffer from the 80/20 rule (you know – where 20% of the people do 80% of the work).

J: Actually, we work hard to avoid that! We found that our committees were overly complex and formal at times so we focused on simplifying our committee structure. In some cases, the committees transitioned to become more flexible small action groups that enabled decisions to be made more efficiently. This has allowed for more members to get involved in church activities without having formal long-term commitments. This even made it easier for newer members to get involved with church activities, more quickly integrating the newer members into the St. Lucas church family.

L: We have a really stable staff and strong Pastoral leadership. We also never seem to want for volunteers and lay leadership when called. We know how important it is, especially given the breadth of our worship opportunities, to pitch in and help out. We'll make public a need for something: another AV crew member, another singer for the choir, someone to help with youth programming; and the members in our church step up. Everyone knows to check our website, our weekly email blasts and our "Get Involved" board near our Welcome Center to find out what help is needed. Not because they feel pressured or bullied or like no one else will do it, but because people at St. Lucas are always answering a natural call to serve. We've worked really hard to create a great worship community and we continue to work hard to sustain it.

P: What about mission work? Does St. Lucas do any?

L: We sure do! It's one of our five core values. Our entire church rallies around mission work every year but I have to say the youth and millennial generation at our church lead an inspiring "front line" effort. We partner with other local churches all the time and even organizations throughout the local community. We saw a real need to add more opportunities for hands-on service. While we continue to be great about financially supporting mission work, we've found that it is extremely fulfilling when we roll up our sleeves together as a congregation. Truly, the local community around our church recognizes St. Lucas in many ways because of our mission efforts.

J: In addition to St. Lucas' mission work outside in the community, we prioritize mission work within the congregation too. This has always been one of St. Lucas' biggest strengths – we really care for each other, remembering that we're all members of God's family. A lot of this mission is carried out by Caring Ministries, a group of volunteers who visit members who are in the hospital or homebound. In recent years, we realized we needed to expand this mission work to also care for members needing different types of congregational care. So now, if for instance a member unexpectedly passes away, or a spouse is deployed in the military, we have a group of volunteers who bring God's love and comfort to those individuals and families. I guess that's all a long way of saying, we're always there for each other.

L: The sense of community at St. Lucas is really special. Some families have been a part of this community for many generations, and I really appreciate how excited they are to welcome and accept new members and visitors. All of the small group opportunities help with that for sure, since that's the best way to meet people and form really tight relationships. But even when you just walk into the social hall, you can tell that we believe the Holy Spirit binds each and every one of us into one united congregation. For most of us, St. Lucas just feels like home!

P: What are your sermons like – that's extremely important to me when it comes to choosing a church.

L: Our Pastors deliver sermons that are relatable, memorable and motivational. Our Pastors do more than just deliver sermons. They are extremely involved in our internal church community and the local community as well. They do a great job of connecting to members and making you think about your faith journey. Plus, we offer several opportunities to further your learning. There are various Bible studies offered throughout the year and even some online Bible Study modules. If you're looking for something less formal, you could even lead a small discussion group yourself or post something on our "Get Involved" board and see if anyone wants to sign up for an impromptu "MeetUP" discussion.

P: Do you have a lot of groups people can get involved in?

L: Well, there's a list out on our website that we work to keep up-to-date. St. Lucas knows that in this day and age, most people like to get their information online so we do a great job of keeping things on our website current.

J: We do? I didn't know that... of course, I very rarely even use a computer, I'm old school. I just call the office and they send me information or tell me over the phone what's going on. Of course, members can receive The Visitor and bulletin by mail too.

L: See? No one falls through the cracks! Anyway, to answer your question about small groups, I'll give you a couple groups members have formed in the last five years.

P: It's that easy? You're kidding.

L: No...I'm really not. St. Lucas empowers members to head up groups and events. First, there's an "Adoption" group where parents who have adopted kids and others who are considering adoption get together to discuss challenges and offer each other advice and support. Another group is an "Addiction and Recovery" group. They meet to help each other through the lifelong recovery process and have even spearheaded some of our mission work to help reach out to others in need, particularly in the local community.

P: What groups are you both members of?

L: I used to be a member of the 20 +/- group but my husband and I are starting to gravitate toward an older crowd, maybe 30 +/- or The Outdoors Club. 20 +/- is mostly people who are starting their work life; some are married; some are not. We made a focused effort to attract younger adults five years ago and now this is one of our most active and involved groups at St. Lucas. That's the beauty of our church. We recognize that needs are always evolving and we encourage small communities within our larger one.

J: I dabble in several different groups. I was recently nominated to be captain of the Rugby team but I'm not sure I have the time.

P: You know, what about weddings? My sister has been looking for a church that can accommodate an evening service. What can St. Lucas offer?

L: Our Saturday evening Peace service has a flexible attitude when it comes to accommodating weddings. We know that having a wedding here is a good way to give couples a strong spiritual foundation for their union.

J: Maybe your sister should come check out St. Lucas this Sunday too.

L: We never miss a shameless evangelism opportunity! Speaking of ways we engage the community, I know your youngest is going to start pre-school next year, I'm sure you've heard of our pre-school program at St. Lucas. It's kind of a big deal in the mission of our church in the community. Our church has fostered an extremely supportive and collaborative relationship with our pre-school. I'd be happy to get you connected to that opportunity as well.

P: Goodness, I have to say I'm pretty interested in coming and seeing everything for myself.

L: Great! We will see you in worship on Sunday and we can catch up over coffee and a doughnut during social hour between services. The social hour is a casual opportunity to catch up with friends and especially take the time to meet new people. Everyone will know you're a visitor so you'll have people wanting to meet you... you'll be like a celebrity!

J: I'll take you by the Visitor's board and get you set up with some nifty take-homes, like our DVD that gives a quick tour of our church and showcases everything we have to offer, and some brochures that our different social groups have made.

L: Or if you prefer, you can go out on our website and see it all before you even show up the first time. We also have a one page guide that gives you contact names, numbers and email addresses for all aspects of our church life. And if you decide to join St. Lucas, you'll be given a sponsor who will help guide you as you become acquainted with everything. But I'm sure that in a matter of weeks, you'll be forming new friendships and know several people you can go to with questions. We really try to make it inviting for new visitors to learn about St. Lucas and begin to feel at home.

P: I can't wait; I think St. Lucas sounds like a great new church home for us.

L: I'm excited you're going to come next week. I think you'll find we have a lot to offer.

J: See you both at church!