

## “OUR FUTURE STORY”

Vision: something that most people have. Vision for the future: an ability that most people do not have, unless we purposely go to God in prayer for direction, God’s plan, God’s vision for us. That is exactly what the congregation of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) did back in 2008. It is now 2015, and my how we have grown in service to God since we began our Strategic Spiritual Journey. During that summer of 2008, with members divided into 23 prayer triads, we studied, talked and prayed for God to give us a vision for our church for the next seven years. During those 100 days, many over-arching themes were realized. But the one that presented itself time and again and spoke to our hearts was the importance of FCC’s Mission Statement. We felt, without a doubt, that God was directing us to grow as a mission-driven congregation, continuing to demonstrate and proclaim God’s joyful, unconditional love in an inclusive environment that provides spiritual growth and nurture for God’s children.

Many prayer triads felt that God was directing us to teach the core values of that Mission Statement to current and future members alike. As encouraged by the triads, we provided opportunities to learn how to share our individual faith stories, as well as our church’s story. We have workshops that focus on what it means to be a truly diverse faith community while finding commonality in Christ among all our differences. Our congregation is growing in relationship with God through our prayer and Bible study groups. And we have built a spiritual mentoring program that trains those who wish to serve as mentors to new members and believers. We were also strongly encouraged to continue the Spiritual Gifts classes as a means of equipping our congregation to identify and utilize their spiritual gifts in the life and ministry of our congregation.

First Christian Church now has 550 members and an average worship attendance of 320. We are receiving 180 stewardship pledges yearly. A photo of new members along with their biographies is printed in the monthly Messenger, and a directory of each member’s occupation, skills and spiritual gifts is available. During that remarkable summer at the beginning of our Strategic Spiritual Journey, the prayer groups shared with us their desire to reach out to others (especially to children) and encompass them with God’s love and care. We now partner with other congregations and faith groups to reach out and help the most vulnerable and forgotten people in Montgomery. Our Food ministry has evolved into the Love Your Neighbor Outreach Center, which provides food, clothing and other services to over 200 families each month. FCC has been instrumental in assisting other churches and communities start similar outreach ministries in the Alabama-Northwest Florida Region. We also formed an Agape Outreach Study Group that not only educates our congregation, but also helps provide interfaith volunteers with the proper tools to lovingly serve the HIV/AIDS community. We are now regarded as the leading source in the Greater Montgomery Area for educating spiritually and Agape-led volunteers not only for the HIV/AIDS community, but also for the neglected and under-served in our city. We are currently contemplating the feasibility of initiating a bi-monthly Agape meal for those with HIV/AIDS.

Three years ago, we completed a major building and renovation project to expand our ministries to children and youth on our main campus. We renovated and expanded our old facilities and added new space to accommodate our growing congregation’s ministry and worship needs. The buildings now provide adequate space for Christian Education for all ages, an after-school program and a weekday preschool that accommodates 60 children. In addition, we have recently added an elder adult daycare program. These wonderful seniors, many without families, have the opportunity to interact with our children. It is a mutual blessing to both generations! Their smiles, laughs and “thank you’s” are music to our ears, and a symphony to God.

A larger sanctuary was completed for our growing congregation. Attention was given to aesthetics as well as appropriate sound, lighting and media requirements to make the 350-seat worship space both inviting and functional. Our nursery and choir room were enlarged and the former youth wing was renovated to house a Spiritual Life Center. This includes a room for Yoga classes, a state-of-the-art prayer chapel (with computer-linked prayer stations), and a reading room—expanded library.

The completion of our building/renovation project was a mission of love. We are definitely being led by God’s plan for FCC to provide space to live out our mission to love and nurture God’s children. We have willing and faithful hearts, so we began that journey while we placed our trust in God’s ability to provide the necessary resources.

Romans 8:28 tells us that “all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God’s purpose.” We have been awed and blessed by God’s plan to be established by us—the family of Christians working together at First Christian Church. We are providing a “safe” place for people to worship the Lord—a place where people who may not feel welcomed in other congregations can come and feel at home from the minute they walk through the doors. This shared diversity is making us a stronger community of faith, willing to continue to reach out and share God’s love.

We have established our West Montgomery Ministry Campus in partnership with United Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). This building houses the Love Your Neighbor After School Program at United and benefits

the children who attend E.D. Nixon Elementary School, which is next door to United. State-of-the-art computer stations, tutors and recreation are provided by paid staff and volunteers from both congregations. In addition, we continue to support United's food ministry to families in need who live around the church. This is an ongoing witness of our Disciples' commitment to reconciliation and justice ministry.

As you know, several years ago FCC's Permanent Fund was established to receive bequests to be used to fund mission. What a blessing this has become! To date, we are three-quarters of the way to achieving our goal of raising \$1,000,000 for the Permanent Fund, and are receiving \$40,000 a year for outreach ministry as we continue to grow the fund! How did we do it with just \$30,000 in initial investment in 2008? We shared a God-sized vision with faithful members, who, like Moses, knew that while they may not get to see it in their lifetimes, believed that God could do amazing things with the gifts they shared. You just never know who might wish to leave a bequest to our wonderful church! Think of all the possibilities for future mission this could provide! Truly, "with God all things are possible." (Matthew 19:26)

After the presentation of the Future Story, our church family did not linger or drag our feet to begin transforming into immediate changes or programs that didn't require extra funding. The need for more small groups within the church came through loud and clear from our prayer triads. A young women's group was formed to meet monthly, as was a support group for those dealing with and caring for elderly parents; a monthly intergenerational group was formed with our children and members of the Keystone class. The children love to present these fabulous seniors with songs, skits and gifts of love. They share and learn so much from each other. A weekly soup and Bible study group was formed for seniors who live near FCC but have no family or few people with whom to interact. We reached out in love and said, "You are welcome here." And they came!

With the establishment of our Pastoral Resident program in 2009, we have been able to more fully live out our mission to meet the spiritual and practical needs of our members and those in our community who are seeking to be connected with God. Of course, Pastor Diamond has a great responsibility directing and leading these young pastors, but she and all the members of FCC are greatly blessed by their presence and devotion to God and to us. Our children and youth are especially thrilled with the time our Pastoral Resident is able to spend with them.

First Christian Church is a church of faith as has been demonstrated many, many times. So, as we are looking into the coming year, 2016, we are finalizing preparations to seed a new Disciples congregation in the Prattville-Millbrook area. Partnering with Church Extension, the Regional Church Development Committee and a Pastoral Advisory Team, we will commission a group from FCC to assist in nurturing this ministry with prayer and evangelistic fervor as we expand our mission and witness in the River Region.

In the New Testament, Paul wrote to the saints in Ephesus to live a life worthy of their calling. He reminded those Christians that God had given each one a different ability... "so that the body of Christ may be built up until they all reached unity in the faith...and become mature." By being humble, gentle, patient and "bearing one another in love," they would attain unity in the Body of Christ. May this also always be our goal: to reach out to others in love as the "Body of Christ."

**The Visioning Team,**

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