

*Acts of Creativity, Compassion and Love*  
*Rev. Thomas Cary Kinder*  
*United Church of Strafford, Vermont*  
*April 23, 2023 Third Sunday of Easter and Vision Sunday*  
*Psalms 84; Acts 2:17; Luke 4:14-18*

**Welcome:** Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Third Sunday of Easter and Vision Sunday. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

Today we are celebrating five years guided by our Future Directions Vision. The full statement is printed inside the pew card that has the Lord's Prayer versions on it. You can find it online on our website at the top of the Welcome page just below the word Welcome. Over the course of this service we will be reading the entire statement and reflecting on it, so you may want to keep it near at hand to read along. Here is the first paragraph of the full version.

“The United Church of Strafford aspires to be a welcoming congregation of open doors, hearts and minds, accepting our imperfections, embracing our differences and other cultures and traditions, and maintaining freedom to choose beliefs as individuals while living up to the name United Church. We want to be a place of faithful Christ-like love to which anyone who needs spiritual, personal or material support can turn, a beloved community connecting deeply and sharing honestly our joys and concerns, honoring and celebrating the experience of our elders and helping to raise the children of the town, a warm nest for us to land in when we are new to the church that becomes in time our spiritual home and extended family.”

This first section of our vision is perhaps the most important because only by our being a loving community can we do anything else in our vision. Everything is built upon this foundation of inclusivity, connection, mutual respect, care and support. We are doing our most essential ministry simply by greeting one another with Christ-like love after the service, so please do this again today, both in the sanctuary and on Zoom.

To introduce our Announcements I will read the second paragraph of the Future Directions Vision statement inside your pew card.

“We want to be a congregation that has vital involvement in everyday life in the community and that reaches out to help those in need. We intend to be a force, not just a presence, responding to wrongs, threats and destructive forces in the world and effecting positive social change, connecting religion to issues of peace, justice and the care of God’s creation.”

If you looked back at all the bulletin announcements of the past five years you would see that most of them are about our involvement in the life of the community and seeking “to be a force, not just a presence, responding to wrongs, threats and destructive forces in the world and effecting positive social change.” And there could have been many more about the behind the scenes ways we care for people in need in the community.

**Call to Worship:** As our Call to Worship I will read the third paragraph of the Future Directions Vision in the pew card.

“We want this congregation to be a sanctuary in the midst of a complex world where we come to be renewed to go out and serve again. We need it to be a place of inspiration and wisdom, with worship services that allow us to connect to our better selves and reflect on a deeper meaning in life, enriched by beautiful words and music, by traditional scriptures, rituals and church seasons, by other religious perspectives and by contemporary voices that help us find new ways of speaking about God and the spiritual realm. We want to offer training in contemplative practice and cultivate a way of seeing the world and our lives as sacred. We want to be a center for questioning and discussing, learning and growing. We hope to consider seemingly insurmountable world problems and find a ladder of faith, hope and love to climb out into thought and action, guided and empowered by the Holy Spirit.”

Today and every time we gather, we are here to fulfill that beautiful, rich spiritual vision. That is what it means to us to worship together...

**Prayer of Confession—** To introduce our Prayer of Confession, I will read the fourth paragraph of the Future Directions Vision, and I invite you to read it aloud along with me, starting at “We want to create...” Let us read together... “We want to create a safe forum where we can consider big questions and controversial issues, sharing with healthy communication, where we

can disagree and still get along, listening humbly, openly and with fairness and compassion to others with differing views.”

Let us pray together in silence, confessing that our communication has not always been healthy, and that our disagreements have not always ended with us still getting along, that we have not always listened humbly, openly and with fairness and compassion to those with differing views. What is more, we can confess to being part of a society that is increasingly polarized without attempting to create a safe forum where we can talk together. Let us ask for the Spirit’s guidance and strength to find our way to fulfill our vision here and in our community and nation...

**Children’s Time**—Good morning! I will begin the Children’s Time by reading the fifth paragraph of the Future Directions Vision:

“We rely on the dedication and generous gifts of our congregational leaders and volunteers. We value traditions and also embrace evolution when change is necessary. We understand that to serve younger generations we need to find new ways of being a church that work for them. We want to help parents see that their children can benefit from what church uniquely offers and to have children involved in every aspect of church life.”

We wrote that five years ago, but it could have been written by Jesus and his disciples two thousand years ago. Like us, they relied on the dedication and generous gifts of their leaders and volunteers. And like us, they were in a time when traditions needed to evolve, when change was necessary.

One of those changes happened when Jesus said, “Let the children come to me.” Jesus saw that the adults had much to learn from the children, even as the children had much to learn from the adults. This was new, and it meant that they had to change their traditional way of being a spiritual community.

Today the traditions no longer are working that made churches successful fifty years ago. Society has changed, and we are still trying to figure out what changes we need to make in order to be a church in our time and place, but two things have not changed: we still want children to be here as Jesus did, and children and young families still need the spiritual and social benefits that churches can provide.

We can thank Joey Hawkins, Danette Harris and Rachel Guaraldi for helping us evolve and create our monthly Story Sunday that brings so many children here. And most of all, we have the Holy Spirit that filled Jesus to thank, because it wants to guide and empower us to help take care of life on earth, especially children.

One of the most important reasons for children to come to church is to learn how to listen for that Spirit in their hearts and discern what it is moving them to do in new situations as the world changes, and there is a tool that we teach to connect to that Spirit...prayer! So let us pray together the Lord's Prayer...

### ***Acts of Creativity, Compassion and Prayer***

Here is the final paragraph of our vision: "We appreciate the old feeling and simplicity of the spirit-filled place in which we worship. It was built with love and we want to continue to love and care for it. We also appreciate the beauty of what takes place within it—worship and the music in worship and concerts that is so important to us and all our acts of creativity, compassion and love."

The United Church of Strafford profile that I saw when I applied to be pastor here said, "We...believe that an inclusive, thoughtful, multi-generational church can be a vital part of life in this community going forward, and can serve people in ways that nothing else can. Our challenge...is to figure out what that looks like, and we hope to find a pastor who understands this and can help us..."

That was the hope of this congregation in 2016. I arrived in the fall of 2017 and one of the first things the Church Council and I did was to send out a survey and hold small group gatherings to figure out what this church could look like going forward.

We collected twenty-six pages of responses. The Church Council formed a Future Directions Study Group to turn the comments into a vision.

The Study Group organized and shaped the comments into twenty-two Statements. We posted the statements on the Parish Hall walls and sent them out to the congregation asking if we had heard correctly. We also asked about how important each statement felt.

Based on the congregation's feedback, we distilled the twenty-two Statements into the long version of the Future Directions vision that we have read, and then distilled it further into the unison reading we will read as our Benediction. Once again, we wanted to make sure we had

accurately represented the voice of the Spirit speaking through all our voices, so we asked for comments and made some revisions.

In the end, on October 28, 2018, we held a congregational meeting and the vision was adopted by unanimous vote. Danette Harris and John Hawkins deserve enormous gratitude for shepherding that long, careful process, producing draft after draft.

What we have is a vision from that moment in time. Five years have passed, and the church and the world have evolved. We need to ask if the vision still fits us today. You will have a chance to reflect on that later in the service.

But first we need to celebrate all that the vision has meant to us, and how it has guided and shaped us.

One of the beautiful things about the vision is that it begins and ends with love. The opening lines describe a congregation guided by Christ-like love, a loving and beloved community open to all. The closing lines express appreciation for Spirit-filled acts “of creativity, compassion and love.”

We could point to many Sundays when we have shone as a loving community, surrounding with light people who were struggling, or comforting one another in our common grief. The time in the last five years that stands out most is the quarantine period of Covid when we gathered by Zoom every Sunday. We reached out of our isolation to share our struggles and our moments of grace. For many it was the highpoint of the week, and for some it was got us through. It may sound funny to say this about a quarantine, but I miss the closeness we had.

The phrase “acts of creativity, compassion and love” encompasses everything we do, the music, the haiku, weekly worship, the Deacons Fund helping local people in need, the Mission Committee sending our support to peace and justice organizations in our nation and bringing relief to crisis areas in other nations, our founding of the Strafford Climate Group and Strafford Anti-racism Group, the training we underwent in 2019 for healthy communication in times of conflict, the William Sloane Coffin weekend, and our current exploration of issues relating to becoming officially open to and affirming of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions—an amazing series of programs reflecting creativity, compassion and love.

Part of our creativity has fallen under the phrase that we “embrace evolution when change is necessary.” The consensus among all churches as we returned to in person worship after Covid was to continue making the services accessible for those who could not attend or did not feel safe risking it. It still is not always easy managing the evolution to streaming and recording technology—just ask Christina who is sitting in for Vin today.

But because of that technology we were able to include Bill and Linda Williams for Bill’s last years, and we have Ken and Marcia and Bob Bushnell from Massachusetts and sometimes Stennie Nelson from Iowa, or David and Ingrid from Guatemala, or Cameron and Gus from South Carolina. We had fifteen people live stream Rod Smolla’s presentation and over thirty have watched the recording so far. We usually have two or three people from our congregation at our Sunrise Service—40 have watched this year’s video. We have evolved in a way that has greatly expanded our community.

Part of our needed evolution is “to find new ways of being a church that work for [younger generations].” We lost our children and young families during the Covid quarantine and tried everything we could think of to draw them back. Finally, we met with Rachel Guaraldi and brainstormed ideas of what could work and hit upon the Story Sunday concept. We embraced evolution when change was necessary and once a month we have more children than we had here before Covid.

Our Future Directions Vision has guided and shaped us in many ways. The fulfilling of it has been even more beautiful and moving than the words. Let us give thanks for this gift in silent prayer, and at the same time invite the Spirit to renew our vision and lead us to our next acts of creativity, compassion and love...

**Haiku by Mel Goertz:**

What a difference  
a day of sun. Coltsfoot blooming  
where there were none.