The context that restores community is one of possibility, generosity, and gifts, rather than one of problem solving, fear and retribution. A new context acknowledges that we have all the capacity, expertise, and resources that an alternative future requires. Communities are human systems given form by conversations that build relatedness. – Peter Block

"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. – Matthew 5:13-15

I am sharing the following summary of the Lenten Conversations and an introduction to the approach I ask Council to endorse to explore our values, vision and ministry today and into the future.

Wednesday Lenten Conversations

During Lent, the congregation was invited to participate in Wednesday evening conversations to share our stories, explore our values, beliefs, and competing priorities, and wonder about our mission – the big questions regarding a) why we exist today, b) what is our purpose and c) how God might be inviting us to participate in Christ's ministry of healing and hope in meaningful ways. Congregants were also invited to review the discussion questions online and share their thoughts before or after each conversation – whether they could attend or not.

Although the conversations yielded rich insights and unearthed some big questions, only six people participated in the conversations and/or shared their perspectives using the online surveys.

Here are a few highlights:

- Values include acceptance, inclusivity, community, relationships, love, and practical opportunities to serve.
- Competing priorities, i.e., the things that prevent us from living in ways that model our values, include financial insecurity, concerns of the future, trying to maintain what was done in the past out habit.
- Bedrock Beliefs, include
  - Images and metaphors like Child of God, open doors, rising Phoenix, Un-gendering God beyond one gender such as father/mother God, Creator, etc.
  - Concepts God is Love; all are created in the image of God, Inclusion, Welcome
  - Experiences, e.g., conversations with friends that provide connections and assurance; being judged on our personality; being asked to pray for someone and believing that the prayer mattered/was real; history of hearing passages over the years; wondering about things.
  - Passages in scripture, e.g., Do not fear, I am with you.
  - Music and specific songs, e.g., On Eagle's Wings

- Mission/purpose pointed in the direction of "how to make Love real?" and included food insecurity; the need to nourish people spiritually, emotionally, relationally as well as physically; making space for important conversations in our greater community, as well as the ancient Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam (Heal the World)
- The conversations also challenged, as some asked "as an aging and tiring congregation do we need to do anything different?"

The last point is a big question that lies at the heart of our priorities for ministry today and potential for the future.

An additional concern is that our current board, committee, and meeting structures make it difficult to have meaningful conversations about big questions related to strategy, approach, or direction.

An Approach for Thriving into the Future

The CAT survey conducted a few years ago revealed a congregation with "High Energy and Low Satisfaction;" place FCCW in a quadrant called "Chaos." There is much to be debated about the terms and I am not a fan of defining a congregation based on congregants "satisfaction," nevertheless the point then and now is that leaving things the way they are will not alter the current trajectory and puts in question FCCW's near term/long term viability.

In my experience, communities who intentionally engage in reflection on the big question: "***How do we 'be the church' in ways that embody and engender the Love of the living God, ministry of Jesus Christ and Spirit of hope and healing today?"*** more intentionally reflect the Love of the living God, ministry of Jesus Christ and Spirit of hope and healing. The path to growth is found on the way of growing spiritually, personally, relationally, and communally.

The process creates the conditions in which a virtuous cycle can emerge as we listen deeply to our hopes and passions; and those of our community; and find ourselves more intentionally embodying and experiencing the love of God. Both the December and Lenten conversations were attempts to begin to model this.

To keep things "simple" the approach calls for the intentional shift of how we look at and think about our ministry, mission, communications, administration, and operations. These conversations are happening opportunistically and organically in some areas, e.g., formation of the Property Team, Deacons rethinking Pastoral Care, Defining Faith Formation, and working to clarify the purpose and focus Outreach.

Conceptually the process looks something like the following:
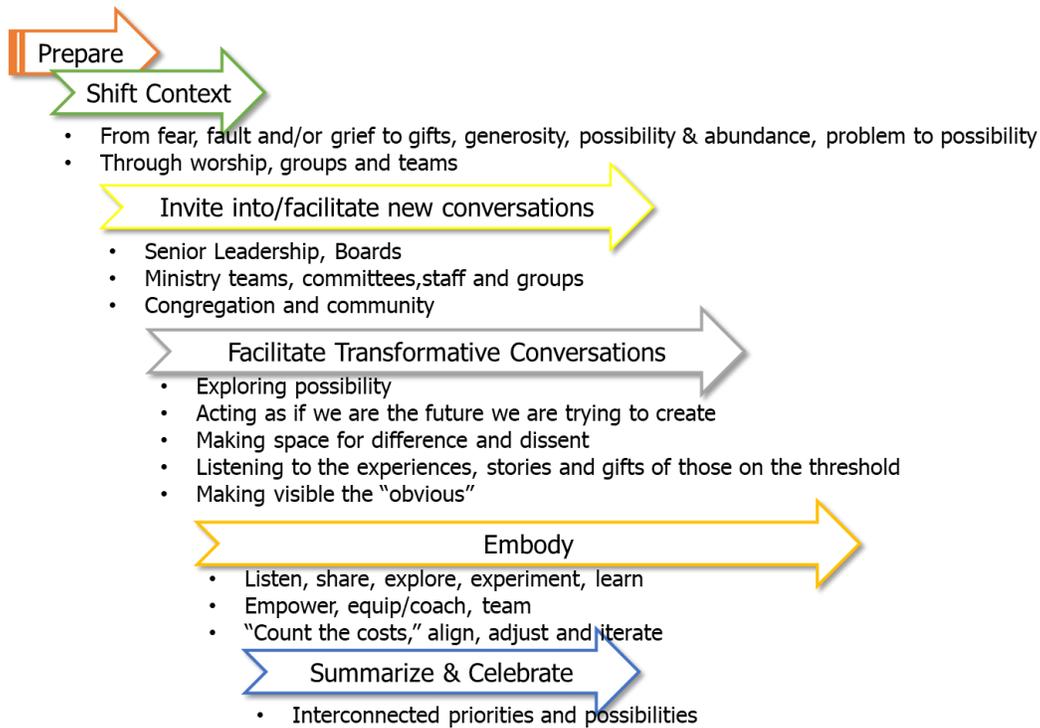
From a practical perspective there are three inter-related "initiatives:"

1. Vision and Values Initiative

Form a small team to around 5 people to work with the pastor to shepherd the process and facilitate conversations within and beyond the congregation to clarify who we are and our understanding of God's call to us today. The process makes time and space to intentionally reflect, listen deeply and engage ourselves, congregants, neighbors and community partners to wonder "what God might be calling us to be and do to participate in Christ's ministry of healing and hope in our lives, relationships, community and God's world?"

2. Community Framework
Encourage committees, teams, ministries, and boards to create their section of our community framework.

The community framework is a way for each team, ministry, committee, and group within the congregation to engage in open conversations to refine and realign our what, how, when, and who with the current needs of the congregation and community. The process is iterative and happens in parallel with other efforts to clarify our purpose. A simplified set of instructions and questions are included on Page 6)

I developed this approach as I served other congregations and refined it through my doctoral research. "Community" because it is created and evolves based on the insights, questions, challenges, hopes and passions of the people serving in ministry in conversation with the values, mission and vision of the congregation, i.e., the body. And "Framework" as it is intended to provide just enough clarity regarding principles, purpose, process and policy to align our what, when, how and who with our why. It is a flexible intended to clarify and capture our current thinking as our ministry evolves.

Here is Why: As congregational church we have a rich and long history and a polity that expresses autonomy and mutual support. The structures and patterns of congregational life are based on a model of ministry that assumes a context of ministry, role of the church, and relationship with the community and leaders that has been shifting rapidly for the past several decades and accelerated in the past year.

The Community Framework augments, clarifies and further describes many of the items referred to in our by-laws. In addition, by describing our process, practices and policies here, we need not burden our by-laws with such things. If inconsistencies arise, by-laws take precedence over the principles, process and practices described – until the by-laws can be amended by the congregation (if desired/applicable).

But is it congregational? Well, yes. Radically so!
Congregationalism is based in the theology and embodiment of covenant. Covenant is a form of relationship that simultaneously acknowledges the autonomy and mutuality of various parties in relationship – and makes explicit our commitments – think God and the covenant with All the Families of the Earth, Abraham and Sarah, Moses, and Jesus. The community framework emulates this covenantal structure by encouraging the ministries, teams, committees, and groups to engage in conversations and reflect on their understanding of their purpose, principles, and shared expectations.

3. Intentionally organizing the themes of worship, faith formation, etc. in support of the themes being explored and things we are hearing through the conversations above.

What I am asking of Council:
1. Endorse the general approach and agree to the need to engage in exploring the question.
2. Help recruit the team to facilitate the values and vision initiative – a mix of gifted and creative and practical people representing different experiences and voices in the congregation.
3. Explore the Community Framework, refine the questions and eventually encourage the conversations and documentation across the boards, committees, and teams in the congregation!

Community Framework Instructions

The purpose of the Community Framework is to foster an ongoing dialogue within and among teams to:
- Reflect on what works and where we might improve existing ministries
- Clarify the purpose of each team, group and ministry
- Deepen our shared understanding of why we do what we do
- Align our activities within and across teams, groups and ministries with our values, vision, mission and beliefs
- Make explicit our principles, shared norms and expectations of how we wish to be with one another as a group, team, ministry and/or community
- Explore questions and possibilities that emerge through an ongoing, evolving creative process in ways that make space for diverse perspectives, opinions and voices

The Community Framework is a living document which is periodically updated and refreshed as teams and ministries evolve. What is most important are the conversations and the way we are with one another in community and ministry. And the document merely summarizes our shared understandings.

Each committee, team and ministry works together (and across teams as needed) to create subsections within the Community Framework for each section of the ministry map and other major activities in the life of the congregation.

Questions to guide the conversation.

The following questions guide the conversations among teams, groups, and leaders.
1. For each ministry/team or major area in the life of the congregation:
   1.1. What is the purpose of the Ministry/Team? Who is served?
   1.2. How does the ministry/team further the vision and mission of the congregation?
   1.3. What are the overall objectives for the ministry/team?
   1.4. How do you define "success," or know things are moving in the right direction?
   1.5. What are the guiding principles that help the ministry/team think through challenges make decisions and wish to honor as we serve others in ministry/team?
   1.6. What are concepts, terms and definitions need to be clarified or defined to minimize confusion and ensure that newcomers understand the ministry/team?
   1.7. How is the ministry/team organized and structure? Is there a leader or co-leaders? Teams and sub-teams? How does the ministry/team relate to other areas in the life of the congregation? Who is accountable for the ministry/team?
   1.8. What are the key processes and major activities for which the team is primarily responsible and/or participates?
   1.9. What are the roles? Leader, co-leader, trainer, facilitator, etc.
   1.10. Are there sub-teams and groups? If so for each create a brief description.
2. For each team or group within a ministry or area in the life of the congregation, return to the questions in section 1 above and answer those that apply (rephrasing as needed) to facilitate a similar conversation among each team or group. If there are sub-teams or groups, repeat as needed, if and as applicable.