

First Congregational Church, UCC



2025

Strategic Plan

**VISION & MISSION,
TOGETHER**

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Where there is no vision, the people perish.....Proverbs 29:18

As far back as February 2018, we had been considering some kind of visioning process. Impetus waxed and waned as other priorities arose. So, it was not out of a sense of panic, or despair about the state of "Church" in general, that in February 2023, the Church Council decided to embark on a visioning process. It simply felt the time was right. To move forward, it was vital to determine God's intentions for us, asking who are we? Where are we going? What were we to do to follow where God is leading? ***This Vision was to be that of the congregation, from the grass roots up, not top down.***

We engaged Jill White, lead Mission Interpreter for UCC in June 2023. After a series of "Information Days" held between November 2023 and January 2024 to encourage people to think about the project, the consultant led process started on January 24th, 2024, with 4 meetings spread over 4 months. A congregational quorum attended, sharing their views and opinions in frank and honest discussions and finally, voting on top Mission Priorities.

The Mission Priorities identified by the congregation were:

1. Missions, Social Justice, Outreach
2. Internal Connections, Relationships
3. Faith Formation, Worship
4. Governance

Our core values, extrapolated from answers to the visioning process, undergird these mission priorities. As a family of faith, we endeavor to...



- be a community where our lives, hopes, and sorrows may be shared in trust
- seek and build upon the love of God alive within each of us
- welcome all people to join us in being open and affirming and accessible to all
- celebrate and preserve the beauty of nature and all that is God's creation
- offer ourselves and our resources to promote God's justice, mercy, and peace

On receipt of the Visioning Report in May 2024, Carole McQueen convened the first meeting of Team Members and continued working with ministries and committees and members to create goals for each Mission Priority. The main source document for the analysis was Jill White's report on the church website. Additional resources include The American Beliefs Study 2021 MissionInsite priorities, ExecutiveInsite, ReligiousInsite, U.S. census, La Crosse School District enrollment data, Experian, MOSAIC family profiles and suggestions made during the information days.

Participants were asked to volunteer to write the plan. Anita Doering, Stephanie Edeler, Steve Fulton, Carole McQueen, and Curt Rees agreed to form that group which was then brought to Council for approval. Their remit was to analyze the information and create a strategic plan to help guide church planning for the next 3-5 years with the following:

- Detailing the purpose of the Vision; answering the question **WHY?**
- Clearly state the **goals set by the congregation**; answering the question **WHAT?**
- Outlining the implementation of the strategic plan; answering the question **WHEN/HOW? completed, in progress - has future completion date, ongoing - continually occurring**
- Assigns accountability for implementation of the plan; answers the question the **WHO?**

Common to all mission priorities and vital to success is good communication. When implementing any idea or project, each ministry or committee should consider the impact on others, including finance, and discuss this with them **prior** to introducing the idea to the wider congregation or community. **With 87% of households in the congregation living in La Crosse County, we should concentrate efforts here.**

With the appointment of Pastor Laura and Pastor Mary, God has honored these bold acts of Faith and obedience. Amazing fruit started burgeoning immediately, achieving some goals already set by the congregation with the added blessing of increased attendance at Sunday Services and engagement in programs. Congregation and staff continue to move in the wake of God's leading and are working harder than ever to keep up.

Analyzing data, consulting ministries and members, several things became obvious confirming the priorities set.

BUILD COMMUNITY/STRENGTHEN FAITH

A strong desire to build up the Church Family finding new and different ways to support all.

SERVE THOSE IN NEED

We are currently involved in many activities and projects to develop and reach out to support those in need, but there is a desire to do more in the wider community in which we are embedded. Many in our congregation are unaware of all we are doing.

VOLUNTEERING

The way people volunteer has changed in the past 20 years. We are much more task oriented, willing to help in ad hoc groups for one off events, e.g. one rummage sale, rather than commit to regular ongoing activities e.g. a ministry member. Some volunteers in our congregation are overextended, working flat out caring for home, family and community. Our Conference Minister Rev Andrew Warner on a recent visit, said the main reason for churches closing is not lack of finance, but lack of volunteers to support their programs. So, the importance of caring for volunteers cannot be overstated.

The Visioning Report suggested many possibilities, but it is also obvious we are in a period of transition and our numbers are growing. Whilst trying to be true to the vision set out in the report, yet recognizing this transitional time, we should further develop current programs, and only slowly, add new initiatives that fit with developing needs both within the church and the wider community.

Ministries are empowered to streamline their activities to best reflect current resources in concert with the strategic plan. Ultimately, 2025 is a year of consolidation and caring for our growing congregation, ensuring it is energized and prepared for the future. An annual review is recommended to monitor progress and identify areas of developing needs.

The goals presented are meant as a guide. We have given possible time frames for tasks of short term (6-9 months), medium term (9 -18 months), long term (18 months - 5 years). In future planning we hope to see the spirit of the overall plan, flowing through the goals and actions of ministries, committees and congregation.

MISSION PRIORITY 1 – MISSION, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND OUTREACH

Our **WHY** "Let us not love in word or speech alone,
but also in Deed and Truth." John 3:18

This Mission Priority is all about following Jesus' example and command to "love your neighbor as yourself". We are already involved in supporting many projects* to fulfill this mission.

Volunteering helps us achieve our aspirations and aids personal and spiritual growth. Initiatives we currently support are always looking for more volunteers. So, we must look carefully at what new initiatives we adopt, but still try to follow where God and our passions lead. **Investing in and developing current programs so we do all things well, should take priority over new ones unless they can be fully resourced.**

To better help our community at large, we reviewed suggestions. Discussing these with ministries and members, we identified those that could be prioritized to have an immediate positive impact to meet current needs and those that were not appropriate at this time or at all.

What	Progress	Catalyst
Community Needs Assessment	Rejected	MSJ
<p>It is important to dream but also be realistic. After discussion with MSJ, it was felt that there were currently more than sufficient needs already identified that fall within the Congregation's chosen focus of food insecurity, homelessness and social and racial justice. Thorough assessments have already been carried out by Great Rivers United Way, La Crosse County, Gundersen and Mayo so further Community Needs Assessment were not required at this time. These reports are still fertile ground for new mission priorities.</p>		
SHORT TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Mission Trips	Ongoing	All Ministries, Pastoral Staff
<p>Mission Trips help all our congregation expand their perspective of the world beyond La Crosse. Traveling to experience mission work also builds connections and relationships. It would be helpful if ministries could suggest mission experiences they feel should be prioritized.</p> <p>Mission Trips were suggested to support and develop many areas including as part of adult education, confirmation, JAM, mission and social justice and as an intergenerational event. Service projects can also bring all ages together. These could have an international perspective supporting oppressed peoples, or collaborating with youth in other countries. People in our area had a somewhat strong preference for volunteering in the community and getting involved in social causes. 1</p>		
Mental Health	Ongoing	WISE
<p>Currently WISE is the only group looking specifically at Mental Health. Support and equip the WISE group to develop initiatives which reach all ages. Already kids' movies and Adult Ed talks on mental health have taken place. Discussion groups with subjects decided by the congregation are in progress.</p>		

What	Progress	Catalyst
Environmental Justice	Ongoing	Creation Care/All Ministries
<p>Continue Working across ministries raising environmental justice education for the whole church. A repeat of the very successful "resources" event in church should be encouraged. Members and the wider community came and it raised the church profile as an environmentally aware and caring church.</p>		
Building Use	Ongoing	All Ministries, Office Manager
<p>Many suggestions were raised for the local community's use of the often-empty spaces in our building. Viewing of the church calendar is now open to the wider community via Facebook. The new online calendar is extremely important to facilitate smooth implementation of building uses.</p>		
MEDIUM TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Reduce Carbon Footprint	Ongoing	Creation Care, Alternative Energy Committee, All Ministries
<p>Reduce our carbon footprint through the installation of solar panels stemming from an energy report in 2023 is still in progress. The solar project is expected to come in front of the congregation in 2025 or 2026.</p>		
Little food pantry	Not started	Buildings & Grounds, ad hoc group
<p>To help address immediate food needs, build a little free food pantry next to the little free library at the front of church.</p>		
LONG TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Partnership working (Lilly Grant)	Not Started	MSJ, WISE, Creation Care
<p>In November 2024, Viterbo and the ELCA La Crosse Synod announced separate \$1.2 million grants from the Lilly Foundation for thriving churches. MSJ & WISE will research in 2025 to assess what priorities they have that could fall within the parameters of the grant.</p>		
Marginalized Community Partnership	Ongoing	C.E., MSJ, Creation Care
<p>Native Americans, Hmong, Unsheltered, and LGBTQ+ are examples of groups we could work with for: community education events, mission trips, environmental partnerships.</p>		
Sanctuary Church	Not Started	WISE, ad hoc group
<p>Uncertainty for many is a reality today. Explore the process for becoming a Sanctuary Church. A mission trip to a Sanctuary Church and bringing in speakers may be helpful.</p>		

What	Progress	Catalyst
Pathways Home	In Progress	Pastor Laura
<p>Working to prevent homelessness in the La Crosse County Area, Pastor Laura is investing time to work with this group. There may be future opportunities for congregants to draw alongside and help in this work.</p>		
Mental health worker	Not Started	WISE
<p>Suggestions were made to express care by providing space for a councilor. The WISE committee will research this possibility. It requires collaborative working with Building and Grounds as well as outside agencies. Therefore, this project is designated as long term and given 2-3 years to complete.</p>		



**EXAMPLE PARTNERSHIP AGENCIES WE SUPPORT
TO HELP FULFILL OUR MISSION**

FOOD INSECURITY

Coulee Hunger Walk
 Food Shelf La Crescent
 Grow La Crosse
 Hunger Task Force
 Hunger Walk
 YWCA La Crosse
 Mobile Meals
 Trinity Monday Meals
 WAFER

UNSHELTERED

Habitat for Humanity
 Warming Center
 WINN What I Need Now
 St Clare Health Mission
 Pathways Home

SOCIAL/RACIAL JUSTICE

Circles of Support
 Hope Restores
 Juneteenth
 New Horizons
 Pride in the Park
 La Crosse Jail Ministry

OTHER BUILDING USE

Bluffside Neighborhood
 Camera Club
 Chamber Chorale
 Chapter CR PEO Sisterhood
 Great River Ringers
 NAMI
 Reed Music Studio
 Songs of Comfort Gathering

OTHER

United Campus Ministry

CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

MISSION PRIORITY 2 - CONGREGATIONAL CONNECTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Our **WHY** "...If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact, God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body." Corinthians 1:17-20



Feeling connected is foundational to all other mission priorities. To support each other, working together, to grow together and reaching out to the wider community.

Analysis of households¹ shows a strong preference for digital communication. Also identified in visioning, was an emphasis on focusing on children/youth/families and connecting those groups to each other and the wider congregation. Age Demographics ¹³ in our area show High School aged children 15 to 17 are remaining constant as a percentage of children between 5 and 17. Overall, there is some evidence of a resurgence of children in the younger years in our area.

Also in our area ⁴, the current year (2023) estimate of marital status ³ reveals a community of adults less likely to be married than the state average. The percentage of single, never married is higher than the state average and older with divorce less prevalent.

Although an emphasis on children, youth and families was asked for, we must also care for adults in our congregation being cognizant of the above state average of single and never married in our area.

There is something for people to participate in every day of the week including occasional Saturdays at our church.* To help facilitate these activities and remain culturally relevant, we need to develop and upgrade our communication systems and technology used in church.

SHORT TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Transport to Church	Completed	M&E fund
Pastor Laura devised a process for organizing transport for seniors. This was taken up by the Visitation Team.		

What	Progress	Catalyst
<p>Intergenerational Events²</p> <p>The top priority identified in the visioning is to create community through activities and events. Anyone can initiate an event so long as it is approved by a ministry, committee or Council. People's passions create more opportunities organically, facilitating growth in a variety of ways reflecting the "from the bottom up" approach. It was also "strongly preferred" as a church program by people in our area ²</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Pastor Mary, Ministries, ad hoc groups</p>
<p>Events Calendar</p> <p>Many individuals and all ministries have asked for an accessible church calendar now available on our Facebook page and also viewable by outside agencies to consider booking an event. This is a good way of promoting building use. Having the calendar viewable on the website would be beneficial as not everyone in our church uses Facebook. It is essential to fully resource the maintenance and updating of our digital presence.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Office Manager, Paid Employee</p>
<p>Digital Support</p> <p>The preferred method of communication is digital within the congregation and the community²⁵. Many in the congregation are unaware of the content of the church website which impedes dissemination of information. With many current activities and more being added, information about ministries, programs and projects etc., it is vital that <i>Digital Support</i> is developed. To remain culturally relevant and showcase our presence to the wider community, we must identify how to maintain and update our digital footprint and provide funds to facilitate this.</p> <p>Digital support in areas for medium/long term development include volunteer needs and church activities.</p> <p>Volunteer needs: ² Opportunities to Volunteer in the Community was one of the top programs recommended to meet the needs of people in our area. Develop and enhance the "Serve" area of our website. Important to regularly promote this in builetin etc. to inform new folk entering our church and remind current members. Combine Stewardship's paper surveys with the gifts and abilities survey on the website.</p> <p>Church activities: Many in church are unaware of all we do as a church. An easily accessible central location for this important information is urgently needed.</p>	<p>Not Started</p>	<p>Office Manager, Paid Employee, Finance</p>
<p>WINN</p> <p>Have a congregational <i>What I Need Now</i> (WINN) list on the website or displayed in the narthex. WINN is a program where you can find assistance from people who have volunteered time to do specific activities like snow shoveling, general yard maintenance, grocery shopping, etc.</p>	<p>Not Started</p>	<p>TBD</p>

What	Progress	Catalyst
<p>Skills survey</p> <p>Identifying not only skills, but levels of willingness to use them in service to the church, will help inform us of the possibilities of completing any initiative. The results will be made available to all ministries and committees to use as a starting point in identifying volunteers, for example for an ad hoc group. An invitation for new members to complete would be beneficial and also combine Stewardship's paper surveys with the gifts and abilities survey on the website with cost saving and positive environmental impact. Create a summary of the data and send to ministries and committees.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Stephanie Edeler, Amanda Brouwer, TBD</p>
<p>Invite friends, family</p> <p>This is so obvious but we seldom act on it. Word of mouth is our best advertisement. With an increasing range of intergenerational events, small groups and variety of worship, it is even easier to invite friends and family. Recognizing this can be difficult, we need to find ways to help the congregation do this.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Everyone</p>
<p>Artwork for Narthex</p> <p>The Narthex is our shop window and the first impression given to all visitors. Allied with our online presence, it advertises to visitors and informs the congregation of what we do as a community of faith.</p>	<p>In Progress</p>	<p>Anita Doering, Sam Servais</p>
<p>Friendship Groups 2</p> <p>Opportunities to develop personal relationships were in the top 5 ranked programs recommended for our area. These are organically driven by people's passions and interests. E.g. canoe trip led by Steve Fulton and Shauna Sallman. It is hoped a men's group and the missing demographic 20-40 year old will emerge from Friendship Groups.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Julie Nelson Coordinator</p>
<p>Music Ministry</p> <p>Building on the varied music offerings on a Sunday, funding is vital to continue to promote music as a place for people to join and explore church. Putting faces to the glorious voices and instrumentalists will encourage new participants in music ministries and further develop opportunities for children's music.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>S&W, Choir Directors, C.E.</p>
<p>Welcoming 2</p> <p>New visitors mainly use the Fellowship time as their first encounter with others in the church. Ministries should promote and highlight this time, encouraging members to draw alongside new visitors. MinistryInsite survey shows "not feeling welcome" as the top reason for NOT participating in a religious community. Revive providing sensory appropriate orders of service etc. would help in being more inclusive. Consider training sessions and/or Pastor Laura planning a Service on welcoming.</p>	<p>Ongoing</p>	<p>Congregation, Ministries, Pastoral Staff</p>

MEDIUM TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Family Bathroom	In Progress	Building & Grounds
Further emphasizes our commitment to being fully inclusive and providing comfortable baby changing facilities shows our commitment to caring for families.		
LONG TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Mental Health	Ongoing	WISE
Is an area of growing concern. The WISE (Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, Engaged) committee, are working through the 12-step process to help us become a designated WISE Church. Already highlighting topics for discussion, the Wise Committee takes the lead on developing long term possibilities e.g. paying for/providing a mental health counselor.		
General Transport	Not Started	Membership, Office Manager
Create a list of volunteers willing to offer transport at various times, not just on a Sunday, stating when they would be available.		

***Current Connections and Relationship Activities**

<u>Sunday</u>	<u>Tuesday</u>	<u>Friday</u>
Donuts & Discussion	*Coffee Klatch	*Parents Night in Kids
Faith Forum Various	Havenwood	Night Out
Topics	Book Club	Bell Choir Rehearsal
Fellowship Hour		
Nursery, JAM	<u>Wednesday</u>	<u>Seasonal</u>
OWL	Sip n Scripture	Bible Camps
Sunday Fundays		*Friendship Groups**
Worship	<u>Thursday</u>	*Intergenerational
	Choir Rehearsal	Events**
<u>Monday</u>		*Rummage Sale**
Book Group		*Thanksgiving Dinner

*See Church Calendar, E-Greeting for Details

** Dual purpose Connections and Outreach or Faith Formation

Citations

- 1 - 2023 Census and La Crosse School District enrolment
- 2 - The American Beliefs Study - Ministry Insite Priorities Report of FCCC geographical area
- 3 - US Census, Experian, The American Beliefs Study - (Executive Insite)
- 4 - Area Identified for Mission Insite report = insert picture/link here
- 5 - Mission Insite, Mosaic family profiles

MISSION PRIORITY 3 – FAITH FORMATION

Our **WHY** "...but speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ," Ephesians 4:15



Faith formation was the top mission priority with more than double the votes of any other. As Faith Formation Minister, Pastor Laura had a very positive impact on all aspects of faith formation, especially children and youth programs. Upon her appointment as Acting Senior Pastor, it quickly became obvious, to maintain the impetus and development of faith formation; the appointment of someone to carry on and develop that work was urgent. This has been completed with the appointment of Pastor Mary.

Now is the time the congregation needs to stand up and commit time and talents to show this is their top priority. The Christian Education Ministry (C.E.) has comparatively few members and their need for more volunteers is constant.

SHORT TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Worship	Ongoing	Pastors Laura & Mary, S&W
<p>The Sunday service along with other special services such as "ashes to go" is the main way of meeting the spiritual needs of adults. Alternative, contemporary, or a different modality of worship options were suggested. When asked, church members were unclear what that meant or what it would look like. Members traveling to other churches to experience "different" modality was not possible at this time but might be a useful tool in the future and be a medium/long term goal. It is more important to further develop the current service and continue to do it well.</p> <p>Quality sermons were ranked high in ministry programs to meet the needs of people in our area. ² Pastor Laura has been introducing a more participatory style of service which has been much appreciated. But as people learn in a variety of ways the re-introduction/upgrading and adding to the technology we have, will enhance the experience and facilitate new ways to look at things.</p> <p>Service & Worship are taking the lead in improving sound in the sanctuary to enhance the experience for in person and online worshippers.</p>		
Children's Ministries	Ongoing	Pastor Mary, CE
<p>Continue to do what we are doing well without extending beyond resources while planning for future growth. Currently our younger age groups have been expanding leaving a need to find more support for the nursery and leaders and helpers for JAM. This also points out the need for additional physical spaces in the buildings including space for middle school and high school students as children age through and we get more members. Communicating with the preschool about overlapping spaces may be needed.</p> <p>Give further consideration to link children and youth groups with age appropriate projects supported by our church e.g. Habitat for Humanity, Food Pantry, Pride in the Park. Also link willing adults to work alongside them.</p>		

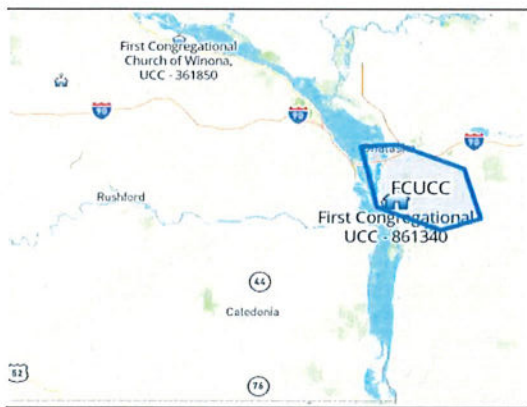
What	Progress	Catalyst
Faith Formation Minister	Completed July 2024	
<p>The appointment of Pastor Mary as Faith Formation Minister, was the fulfillment of the main suggestion for faith formation and JAM (Jesus and Me) which are youth Christian education classes.</p>		
MEDIUM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Adult Education	Ongoing	Pastor Laura, Pastor Mary, Myron Daubert (C.E.)
<p>Continue to have compelling programs and speakers. Mission Trips were suggested to support and develop many areas including as part of adult education, confirmation, JAM, mission and social justice and as an intergenerational event. Service projects can also bring all ages together.</p>		
Faith Study Groups	September 2025?	Pastor Laura, Pastor Mary, C.E.
<p>Small groups are important to develop personal spirituality and create space for people to ask questions of faith. People in our area rank them highly as a strong preference in programs provided 1. Currently Pastor Laura leads a Sip n' Scripture which is very much appreciated by those who can attend. To facilitate more groups for our growing congregation, identify group leaders providing any support or training they felt necessary and canvas the congregation for suitable days/times/location.</p>		
Prayer	Not Started	TBD
<p>Reintroduce personal prayer for a period after the morning service for anyone who wants. Develop the online prayer group and individual prayer partners. Have small group discussions on our understanding of what prayer is and why people find it difficult or embarrassing.</p>		
Pastor Parish Relations Group	Not Started	TBD
<p>To provide an avenue for support and feedback, staff this with Moderators, and others persons identified by Pastor Laura. This group is also mandated in the current Constitution and By Laws but is under review.</p>		



LONG TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Music ministry	Ongoing	TBD
<p>Develop opportunities for children’s music, e.g. a kids Christian music concert. Reach out and invite kids from other churches.</p>		
<p>Additional Worship Service</p> <p>There was a suggestion to reconstitute offering an early worship service from September-May. At this time there is not a need for or ministerial capacity to introduce an additional service on a Sunday or other day. At this time, it is more important to further develop the current Sunday Service and do it well. As the congregation grows in number and diversity, this may become viable and can be revisited. Members traveling to other churches to explore different styles of worship might be helpful in discussion with Pastor Laura on introducing a “different modality” of worship.</p>		

Citations

1 Ministry Insite Priorities - The American Beliefs study



MISSION PRIORITY 4 – GOVERNANCE

Our **WHY** “Now it’s up to you. Be on your toes—both for yourselves and your congregation of sheep. The Holy Spirit has put you in charge of these people—God’s people they are—to guard and protect them. God himself thought they were worth dying for.” Acts 20:28

This priority will be completed at a later date by a group led by Mark Koch that includes Emma Leadbetter, Kathy Storlie, Brad Seebach and Ross Seymour.

SHORT TERM		
What	Progress	Catalyst
Bylaws	In Progress	Mark Koch, ad hoc