



### **Eyes on the Prize**

Reverend Sharon Dittmar  
 First Unitarian Church  
 536 Linton Street  
 Cincinnati, OH 45244  
 (513) 281-1564  
 September 12, 2001

A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. We many think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts – but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

Who and what do we want to become at First Unitarian Church, Cincinnati. We know that day to day we want to live by our UU values, we want to follow our mission statement, the first sentence of which we hear every Sunday morning during the welcome. But where are we going and who and what do we want to become, ten, twenty, one hundred years from now? What do we want to dominate our imagination, thoughts, and character? Quite honestly, this is a question we have never answered in the thirteen years I have been here. Apparently we should have been paying more attention because according to Emerson, we have been becoming something, we just don't know what it is, yet.

Last summer when I attended General Assembly (GA) in Minneapolis, Minnesota (GA is where delegates from all North American congregations gather to do the business of our Association), I attended a workshop on strategic planning. I attended this workshop because I wanted to learn more about best practices for strategic planning, since our Board was set to inaugurate a strategic planning team (which they did). Strategic Planning helps an organization know what steps need taken for improvement. Our last strategic plan (2006) did wonders for our congregation. Through this planning process and the many groups of members from this congregation who attended and gave input, we learned we wanted to grow.

You may have forgotten now, but I was on sabbatical at the time and I remember quite well that this was your recommendation and conversation with one another. I returned from sabbatical, read the strategic planning report, and nearly fell out of my chair when I read that you wanted to grow to 320 members in five years. But we did it. We followed your suggestions, made plans, and grew to the size you requested. Of course we have had to make many adjustments to accommodate that growth, but here we are, as you desired.

So I have learned that a good strategic plan, with excellent follow through, gets results. As I attended this workshop I learned one crucial thing; a strategic planning process should begin with a vision statement. Well, I can see why, if we grew in just five years, as you suggested, imagine what we could do with a vision statement.

And today we don't have one. What a marvelous opportunity.

So what is a vision statement? A vision statement is a broad, imaginative statement of who we will become. A vision statement should be brief and capture the imagination. Vision statements should tell the world where a group expects to be in fifteen to twenty years. Tom Rohrer, co-chair our current strategic planning committee, along with Mimi Gingold, told me that when he worked in Japan, many companies had vision statements of where they wanted to be in 100 or 200 years. Vision statements capture a group or individual's dream for where they will be after a long period of time.

Currently, as I told you, we do not have a vision statement. We have a mission statement. A mission statement, what we have now, articulates core identity, values, and principles. It is a day to day guide for living and making decisions. I love our mission statement. It guides many of the decisions I make, such as my goals for the year. But it can not tell me where we want to be in 20 years. That dream, that hope is left unsaid. Whatever dominates our imagination and thoughts, our character, is unsaid. Right now, we probably have 150 different visions among us.

No wonder we argue. Without a vision we devolve to lower common denominator issues. There is nothing to lift us, to keep our eyes on the prize of who we will become. Not who we can become, but who we will become. I like vision statements. They are bold, they capture dreams, they are big.

Here are some sample vision and mission statements so you can see the difference. Mission and vision statements are related to one another. They enhance one another, so you will see some overlap. The vision statement for the furniture and goods store IKEA is "Affordable solutions for better living." That is where they want to be. Their mission statement is in the present "To create a better everyday life for the many." A core value for IKEA is to serve the many (which they do around the world) with affordable goods. Their mission statement goes on to elaborate "low prices, but not at any price." Their vision statement is on the front page of their web page. It declares who they are and will be. Here's another vision statement. It is actually a combination vision and mission statement from Amazon. "Our vision is to be earth's most customer centric company; to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy online." I included this vision/mission statement because I find it so compelling and bold, two qualities vision statements are supposed to embody. Amazon wants to be the earth's most customer centric customer where people can find anything they want online. If Amazon can fulfill this vision they will not have any competition. And they are profoundly customer centric and it regularly stuns me what it is possible to buy on Amazon. Most recently I purchased a no longer produced, jumbo sized stuffed animal. That felt customer centric to me. I log on and Amazon welcomes me, knows it is me. That feels customer centric too. They are living their vision.

As I looked at other vision statement I noticed other qualities. Vision statements are fun, grand (many companies claim they will be the best in the world), and are profoundly positive about life, people, change, and just being. I think it must be a delight to create a vision statement. Given our

congregational polity, the creation of a vision statement is the people's work. So I have the pleasure of telling you that you will be working together, in small groups to create a vision statement for First Church so that we can keep our eyes on the prize and make our way someplace great in 20 years.

I want to clarify that a vision statement does not provide a road map for how to get where we dream to go, it articulates the dream itself and then we figure out how to get there using our UU principles, mission statement and strategic plan. All the while we keep our eyes on that prize and use successful old things and try innovate things to lead us to the prize.

This fall we are about to embark on this adventure. On Sunday, November 7<sup>th</sup> you will have an opportunity to participate in a small group that will be led through a skilled, facilitated process, to help us clarify our dreams. You must come. We need everyone to attend so that we can live into our congregational polity. Setting our vision is the right and privilege of the people. This will be concise, timely, and efficient. There will be religious education classes for the children, and food for everyone. People who cannot attend the service will have another evening to attend and share dreams. The staff will be interviewed separately for their dreams. The Strategic Planning Committee has already interviewed me about my dreams for First Church. We are leaving no stone unturned in order to clarify your dreams, our dreams.

Afterwards, the Strategic Planning Committee will find a way to put our dreams in one sentence that will be posted for your review. They hope to have you, the congregation, vote your approval of this statement, to shape where we arrive in the next twenty years, before the winter holidays begin. You love to vote. You get to vote! I hope that when I return from sabbatical I again fall out of my chair because I am so captivated and enthused by your vision.

Am I nervous about this happening while I am on sabbatical? Not in the least. I trust you and I trust congregational polity. When we created the mission statement we have today, which I treasure, I did not participate in a small group. As I told you, I was on sabbatical the last time we created a strategic plan. I have shared my thoughts with the appropriate people, and I will share some more with you today. But the main point here is that this is your dream because this is your congregation.

Can I also say that this will be a great task for you because it will stretch us a congregation. We are not really dreamers here, and if we are, we keep that to ourselves. We are practical here, serious, sincere, careful, and thoughtful. We manage our money well. We are responsible and generous stewards. We follow our by-laws and Constitution, and make adjustments when we don't. In short, we are a bunch of Myers Briggs J's, for those of you who know that language. We dot the eye and cross the t. We don't sit around and dream. We are not the people of spontaneity, change, and inspiration. We are skeptical of new things and big ideas.

What a marvelous task, our faith lives should regularly take us to new places, even when they are awkward, especially when they are awkward. I couldn't wish anything better for you while I am gone. In addition, vision creation is proactive, an exploration of ourselves and our hopes. It is not reactive to changes; it makes a change, the change we want to make for us. I am so excited. Go deep, cull forth your dreams, and be bold. What do you see in the sacred hoop? Where do your dreams take us and who will we become?

Now, I do not want to give you a vision statement because this is your work. You must decide. This is the legacy of our Puritan ancestors, congregational polity. You decide who we will become.

Here though, are some of my dreams, that everyone in Avondale and around Cincinnati knows who we are and where we are located. That even our friends of different faith and no faith, respect us for what we do and how we live. That we are a sanctuary and wellspring for religiously liberal adults and children who share our faith. That we attract people who look and act like those of us here today, and several people who do not look and act like us because God's love and world are wide and we need not love or look alike to love one another. That worship makes members and visitors sing and change their lives and our message is heard beyond our walls. That we think of the whole of the hoop before ourselves. That our congregation is filled with a spirit of trust, hope, love, humor, and courage.

Recording of me falling off chair to follow.

Amen