

Transition Team Summary Report

2018-2021

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INTRODUCTION: THE INTERIM PERIOD

A significant time in the life of a congregation is the period between settled ministers. It can be a phase of anxiety and confusion as well as a valuable chance to begin anew. The interim period between the end of one minister and the beginning of another provides a breathing space during which a congregation can devote time to self-examination and institutional renewal. It's a time for a congregation to discover, articulate, and grow into its identity.

First Parish leadership saw the time between ministers as a transformative time for us to build new energy and make a collective commitment to assuring the future relevance of the First Parish as a center of our spiritual life together. It is giving us the opportunity to tune up for a new era.

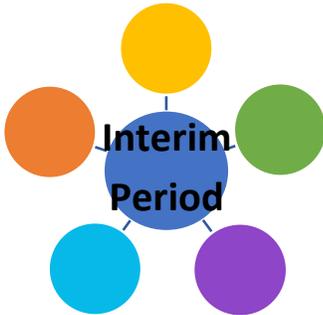
First conceived as a two-year commitment beginning in 2018, the interim period of First Parish was extended to three years to allow extra time for healing after the sudden departure of our former minister, the Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti. Another year was added as the COVID-19 pandemic and unrest after the killing of George Floyd gripped our world, our thoughts, and our church.

We were blessed to have The Reverend Jenny Rankin walking by our side through this entire time. Jenny brought a sound understanding of the transition process and a deep sense of wisdom to our transition time. We are profoundly grateful for her guidance, her insightful questions and her unerring sense of what needed to be done. Thank you, Jenny, from the depths of our hearts.

This report is an attempt to communicate the learning and messages accumulated through three years of discussions, meetings, surveys, and workgroups. It's challenging to capture the energy that our parish has invested in the process - this is the Transition Team's best attempt to acknowledge and celebrate the journey we've been on together, to gather the reflections in one place and to communicate the essence and picture of First Parish that emerged and crystalized over the past three years. We're also identifying topics and issues that merit further attention and discussion as we prepare to welcome our new settled minister and position ourselves to step into our envisioned future.

Thank you.

FIVE FOCUS POINTS OF AN INTERIM PERIOD



An Interim Ministry period provides a precious opportunity for a congregation to pause, take a fresh look at itself and renew a vision for its future. That introspection often involves consideration of a church's heritage, leadership, mission, connections and future, as illustrated below:



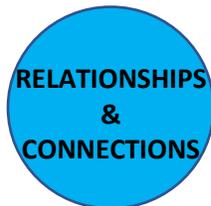
Who have we been?
Coming to terms with history
Honor our history
Engage & acknowledge
griefs & conflicts



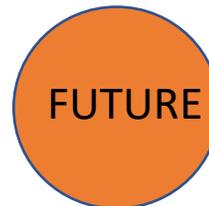
Who are we now?
Discovering our identity
Recognize our unique identity
Discover strengths, needs &
challenges



How are we?
Managing shifts in leadership
Develop new, clear and
appropriate governance &
leadership structures



With whom are we connected?
Reassess links and consider new ones
Consider all relationships First Parish
builds outside of itself



Who will we be?
Commitment to a new leadership and a new future
Sharpen vision
Strengthen finances
Revitalize whole community
Prepare to welcome a new
leader with zest

THE TRANSITION TEAM

In late 2018, the Parish Committee formed the Transition Team by selecting a group of seven church members who were widely known, were acquainted with the congregation's history and who reflected many of the communities and interests within the congregation. The Transition Team had three major roles. One was to provide Rev. Rankin with insight, organizational and facilitative talent, and willing hands as the ministry proceeded. Another role was to guide the Congregation through a time of self-reflection, learning and growth. The third was to help the Congregation prepare for a new settled minister.

TRANSITION TEAM MEMBERS

Over the course of three years, many talented individuals played an important role on the team. Each person brought valuable perspectives, gifts, and skills to the team. Each member contributed in significant ways to the overall success of our effort and were greatly appreciated.

2018/2019 Team Members

- R.L. Smith (Co-Chair)
- Gina Halsted (Co-Chair)
- Chris Hamilton
- Kathy Huber
- Ken Hurd
- Elizabeth Robbat Kelly
- Liz Wilkinson

2019/2020 Team Members

- R.L. Smith (Co-Chair)
- Gina Halsted (Co-Chair)
- Becca Fasciano
- Chris Hamilton
- Kathy Huber
- Ken Hurd
- Liz Wilkinson

2020/2021 Team Members

- Gina Halsted (Chair)
- Chris Andrysiak
- Becca Fasciano
- Chris Hamilton
- Kathy Huber
- Ken Hurd
- Gary Taylor

OUR METHODS

The Transition Team's role was to help organize and facilitate discussions. Facilitators kept the discussion on topic, ensured that each person had a chance to participate and made sure that the conversation centered on sharing and listening rather than persuasion or debate. After each major discussion, the Transition Team identified the major messages, themes and ideas that emerged from the discussions, which were shared with the Congregation.

The Transition Team utilized several structured discussion techniques including small group structured formats, like the Listening Circles, and the "World Café" approach used for the discussion of the Spirituality Snapshot Survey. More recent, COVID inspired discussions used virtual techniques. The purpose of all these discussions was to build understanding, rather than achieving consensus and, we believe, is helping First Parish become a community that is comfortable discussing subjects where we know we have differing views.

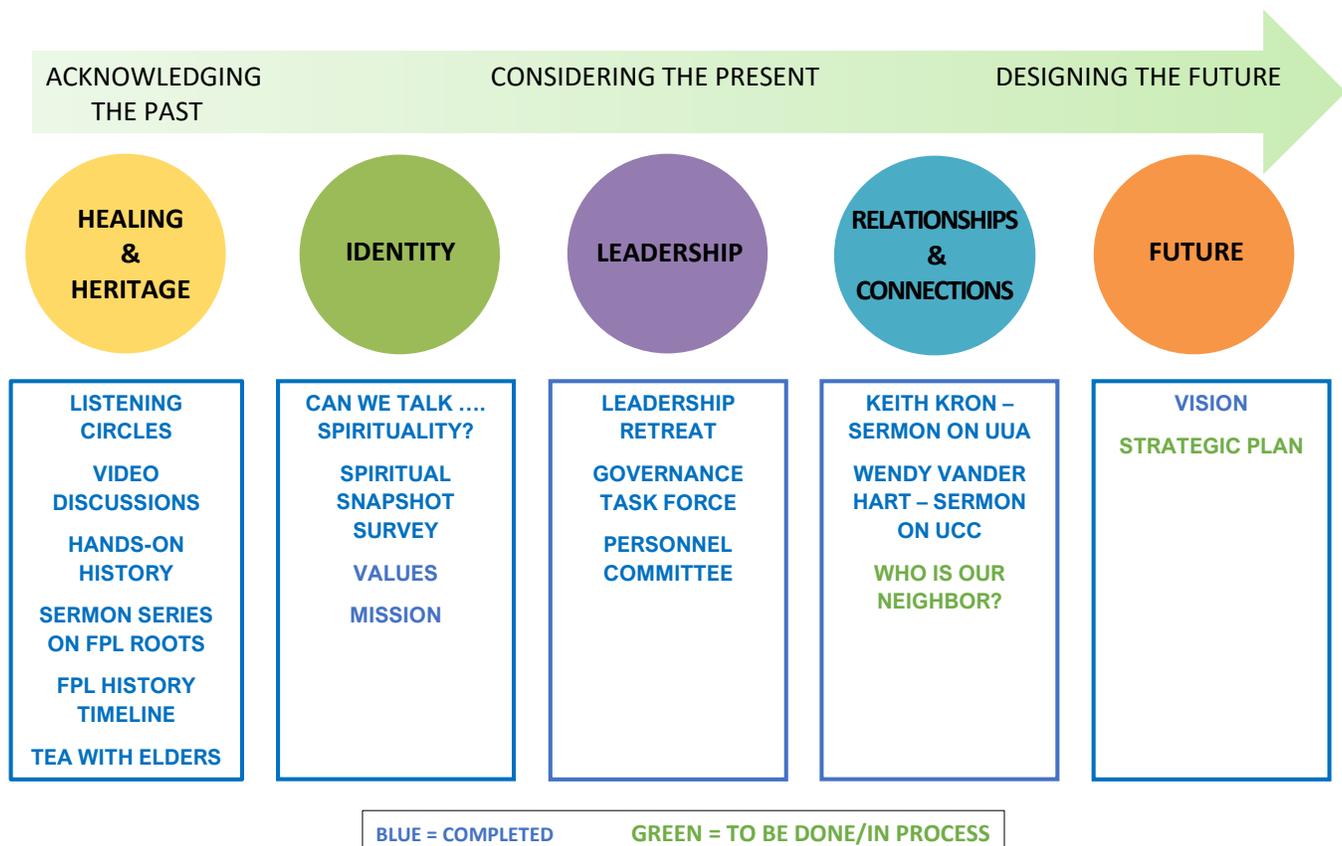
OUR JOURNEY

We've been on a journey together for the past three years. It's remarkable to look back at the times we've gathered together, the discussions we've had and the learning, growing and understanding that's occurred since 2018. We began with a focus on healing and closure before moving to understanding the historical roots of our church and our two affiliated denominations.

Most of our time was spent discovering and articulating our identity. Why did we need to define our identity? Why couldn't we just be what we are and not worry about articulating it? The broad answer is that defining ourselves helps us be what we want to be. Additionally, if the Search Committee and ministerial candidates have a solid understanding of our identity, we maximize the chances that our chosen minister will be a good fit for us and can lead us in the directions we want to go.

We started an investigation of identity by asking each of us consider our own personal spirituality. That reflection began with the Can We Talk ...Spirituality? set of discussions and culminated with the Spirituality Snapshot Survey.

After considering individual spirituality, we shifted to articulating the Values, Mission and Vision for First Parish as a whole. The congregation has been actively engaged and have provided valuable feedback and opinions each step of the way. It's been an incredible process – look at all we've done!



REPORTS

The next section of this report provides detailed information on each of the discussions or exercises that we did together. Most of our discussions concluded with a presentation and report where the Transition Team reflected back what we'd heard. Each of those reports, beginning with the Listening Circles which started in January, 2019 are provided here in chronological order. Where possible, the entire report is included. In some cases, like the Spirituality Snapshot Survey, the number of comments were so impressive that the entire document was too long to include. In these cases, we are including a link to the full digital document.

Please take time to read and appreciate all we've done as a congregation. Revisiting our past discussions is a tremendously moving reminder of how much we collectively have grown, shared and learned about each other, about the community we form and about First Parish.

We began our transition work in early 2019 with The Listening Circles. Designed to provide a safe and structured way to help parishioners reflect on their experience of Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti's ministry and departure, the Listening Circles were the first of many opportunities to reflect, share and listen to each other.

The Listening Circles Report

*When radical change is forced upon a congregation, often by the departure of a minister, the task is simple to name: it is **to accept the change and move on to embrace the opportunities that change allows.*** John Weston, former transitions director for the UUA.

The First Parish in Lincoln has taken the opportunity of an interim period between ministers to help it process the past while designing its future. The challenging tenure and sudden departure of Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti left many parishioners with raw emotions. In January and early February, the Transition Team and interim Minister Jenny Rankin offered Listening Circles to help members of our congregation reflect on their experience of Manish's ministry and departure. The Circles were First Parish's first organized forum to begin the healing and "Accept the Change".

Listening Circles are a structured and thoughtful process that provides a safe place for participants to share personal opinions, feelings and experiences. It allows participants to understand the experiences of others, helping to engender mutual understanding and support. This report will share the major themes and messages gleaned from January's Listening Circles.

Format

Twelve Listening Circles were offered in January and early February. They were facilitated by Jenny Rankin and two Transition Team members. Between 6-13 participants attended each circle, allowing for a diversity of experiences while ensuring a reasonable time commitment. Each circle was 90 minutes long, had the identical format and questions. 110 parishioners participated in the Listening Circles.

The format was simple. Participants were seated in a circle. After a welcome and reading of the Listening Circle covenant (which included confidentiality), the first question was read to the participants, who had a minute to reflect. Each person in the

circle was then offered up to two minutes to respond to the question. Others in the group listened respectfully to the person speaking and didn't comment, discuss or debate. After the first person had finished sharing, the person next to them was invited to speak. One person spoke at a time. The same method was repeated for two additional questions.

Summary of responses to Questions: Detailed below are the three questions asked at each Listening Circle and a summary of responses to each question.

Question 1: Tell us something about your personal experience of Manish as our minister. Perhaps something that went well or something you wish had gone differently.

Participants' reported experience	Overall	Range across sessions
Mainly positive	34%	0 - 44%
Mainly negative	43%	10 - 75%
Both	24%	11 - 22%
Neither	5%	0 - 30%

Key points:

- Many people (28%) took issue with Manish's particular actions or style of dealing with a committee, or project, or the congregation as a whole: "top-down," "tried to change things too fast," "didn't support [my committee or project]," "missed church gatherings," "resisted my suggestions."
- People had differing reactions to Manish's sermons, but with more negative (26%) than positive (12%).
- Manish's pastoral care and memorial services were widely appreciated (24%)

Issues that may affect the way we select and work with a new minister:

- The pattern of different reactions to Manish may reflect differing hopes about what we want in a minister, and perhaps what kind of church we want First Parish to be.
- Some comments reflect unspoken expectations of a minister, such as how fast change can occur, how much attention the minister pays to committees, and how many church gatherings the minister should attend.

Question 2: This is an opportunity to reflect on the last few years, particularly our time with Manish.

In the ministry world, tenure less than 5 years is highly unusual. Manish left our church after three years.

From your perspective, what happened?

- 26% of participants cited FP church/congregation factors
- 33% cited Manish actions/style
- 41% mentioned contributing factors from both First Parish and Manish

Key points made about Manish:

- Many people mentioned aspects of Manish's style or way of being that, in their opinion, caused challenges: "didn't share much", "was closed off", "couldn't deal with criticism", resisted suggestions", "top-down", "rigid", "more controlling than leading"
- Too many changes made too quickly was often mentioned
- There was speculation that FP wasn't what Manish expected
- Some felt that Manish didn't know how to handle us

Key points about First Parish:

- We weren't ready for Manish (or any new minister)
 - Many still mourned Roger
 - Our congregation was already divided (over Sterns Room and other issues) when Manish arrived
 - We didn't REALLY know what we wanted in a minister/we had unrealistic expectations
 - We didn't have a clear understanding of our purpose, mission & goals
 - We did not understand/acknowledge the mutual responsibility in the relationship
- The congregation didn't have a way to engage in discussion about what was going on and people's reactions to the situation.
- Conversations moved "underground" and created an additional divide
- There was a governance breakdown within the church
- Many felt that we didn't give Manish enough of a chance to succeed
- A fair number felt that we were rigid and that we don't like change.

After awareness of Manish's video, many made comments about broader issues of race/culture within Lincoln.

Question 3: As you reflect on the last three years, is there anything you wish you had done differently? Anything you wish we as a congregation had done differently?"

The responses fell into a number of areas:

Doing More (44%) Participants felt they could have been done more, either as individuals or as part of the First Parish Community.

Of these, 33% felt they personally could have done more by reaching out to Manish, or by being more proactive in sharing when they noticed a problem, or by working harder to make Manish's ministry with us work. There were also those who regret missing the signs of a problem. Or that they felt powerless.

The remaining 11% felt the First Parish Community could have done more. Some by better getting to know Manish and his family and welcoming them into our community.

Inability To Do Anything (18%) There were those who felt the problem was outside of them. That the problem was either Manish's personal issues, or his work style and actions, or that some members of the congregation were taking matters into their own hands.

Governance (22%) Governance was another major area of where participants felt we could have done things differently. This area broke down into two areas: Church Governance and Ministerial Support.

Church Governance, 19% believe:

- First Parish needs to have established communication paths and processes with clear lines of responsibility.
- First Parish needs to work more closely with our two denominations.
- First Parish needs to be actively engaging members in conversation.

Ministerial Support, parishioners also felt it vital to review the minister.

- That we must give feedback within the first few months of tenure.
- That we must have Annual Ministerial Reviews.
- They also felt it important to have a support group for the minister.

Transition and Search: 14%

- **Ministerial Skill Set.** First Parish needs to know, specify, and prioritize required ministerial skills.
- **UUA and UCC halves.** First Parish needs to understand both our denominations and to take into account what of each is important to us.
- **Important to have a multi-year transition.**

Feedback: Feedback on the Circles was extremely positive, with participants saying that they felt heard and respected, and that they appreciated hearing the different experiences of others in the room. Transition Team members were asked if the approach could be used for other difficult discussions within the church.

In early January 2019, over 30 church leaders spent the good part of a day providing input and collective wisdom into the design and direction of the interim period work. In small groups and collectively, they considered three topics:

- Learning from the Past
- Trust
- Top Transition Issues

A few takeaways from the retreat:

From Session 1 – Learning from the Past:

- Although the divisions and hurt associated with Manish’s ministry and departure were significant, a healing process is occurring. The previous Shared Ministry Review and the ongoing Listening Circles have been useful and widely appreciated. The video of Manish’s talk in Detroit, which had just recently surfaced at the time of the retreat, led to additional pain but also created the opportunity for additional open discussion and healing.
- Better understanding our identity – who we are, what we believe, what we stand for – is essential both to move forward as a spiritual community and to select a minister who will be the “right fit” for First Parish. Reaching this understanding will be a large and ongoing process and must involve the whole First Parish community.

From Session 2 – Trust

- “Community” is extremely highly valued by parishioners. Our community needs to be inclusive and safe for all, which requires actively promoting a culture of open and respectful communication, especially on difficult topics.
- Reaching out to individual parishioners in multiple ways is important to make them know that they truly are a valued part of the community. This includes both individual contacts and practices such as communicating through the information sources that parishioners normally rely on, providing childcare to allow parents to attend events, and conducting community-building activities and events.

From Session 3 – Top Transition Issues

- “Top Three” issues seen for the Transition period were:
 - Clarifying our identity, including our values/faith/beliefs, our mission and vision, and the nature of our current and desired membership
 - Clarifying and strengthening our governance processes, organizational structure, and infrastructure (including communications infrastructure)
 - Developing a clear, congregation-wide understanding of our income and expenditures, as well as an understanding of the role of members in maintaining our financial health.

Transition Team Video Discussion Report

March 24, 2019

On February 10th, over 100 members of First Parish and the greater Lincoln community gathered to reflect and share reactions to the video of a talk Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti had made in Detroit.

Facilitated by Parisa Parsa of Essential Partners, the gathering was part of an intentional effort by the Transition Team to provide opportunities for safe and respectful discussions within the church on a range of topics.

Ms. Parsa began by reminding participants that the conversations would be an opportunity to surface multiple/different truths and that each of us experience things differently. She advised that we were seeking understanding, not agreement. She introduced a set of conversational guidelines, including the request to listen generously, speak only for oneself, lean into curiosity (especially when tempted to judge) and assume good intention.

Ms. Parsa led the group through three conversations designed to help the participants share their personal reaction to the video, thoughts on how we can help ourselves move forward and ideas about resources outside of the congregation that would be helpful. The conversations, including specific questions, format and a summary of participant's comments are detailed in this report.

Conversation 1 - What did the video bring up for you?

Format for first conversation:

In the first exercise, participants broke into small groups of three or four people and shared their personal reactions to the video. Notetakers for each group wrote down key words/phrases that captured the essence of each individual's feelings or experience. After the larger group reconvened, the notes were collected. RL Smith and Gina Halsted read each word or phrase out loud, creating a moving and powerful way to hear the range and depth of reactions. A summary of these reactions is depicted here, with the size of the circle correlating to the number of words or phrases that were used. The larger the circle, the more times these words (or phrases similar to these) were used.

Summary of comments:



The most frequent type of responses were words describing sadness, anger, hurt, betrayal and disappointment. Many people expressed feelings of disagreement. A good number voiced compassion and sympathy for Manish. Many described themselves as being stunned, surprised and shocked. Others heard a truth in his message and agreed with or validated his story.

Ms. Parsa led the group in a prayer of understanding and healing, acknowledging the depth of feelings in the room.

Conversation 2 – What does this church do really well that it will want to do more of in order to grow from this experience?

Format for the second conversation:

The larger group was divided into eight subgroups of roughly a dozen people. Each small group relocated to a different area of the building and selected a facilitator. The facilitator read the first question, let each person in the group speak or pass, and took notes on the ideas shared.

A summary of participants' ideas is depicted here, with the size of the circle correlating to the number of responses of this type.

Summary of ideas and thoughts:

What do we do well that we should do more of in order to grow?



The largest group of comments about how we can help ourselves reflected on how we, as a community, care for and support each other. Many felt that we respect each other, trust one another and listen well – and that we should be doing that now. Small groups were often mentioned as a way to care for/support each other and as a way to continue the conversations. Quite a few participants observed that we, as a community, come together well, show up for the church and each other and work hard. Curiosity and the desire to learn were characteristics that were often mentioned. Strong leadership and the warmth of our community were also frequently stated.

Conversation 3 – What resources beyond the congregation might be helpful to us right now?

Format for the third conversation:

While still in the small groups, the facilitator read the third question, and again, each person was able to share their thoughts, which were captured on notes.

Summary of thoughts and ideas:

What resources beyond the congregation might be helpful?



By far, the most often mentioned desire of the participants was to explore, become educated on and discuss issues of white privilege, race, class and sexual orientation. Outside speakers, a lecture series, book discussion groups were mentioned as resources. Connecting with other churches was often mentioned. First Parish in Concord, The Fallon Church in Lexington and St. Anne's were frequently suggested. Re-connecting with a Roxbury Church was also an idea. Quite a few thought that an alliance with the Lincoln School and the Lincoln METCO program/METCO Coordinating Committee would be helpful. Many felt that the UUA and UCC denominations were valuable resources. It should be noted that a few disagreed with the idea of connecting with the denominations, stating that the First Parish in Lincoln has a unique spiritual identity. Several urged First Parish to take a leadership role in the town provide similar discussions to the broader community. Several suggested that outside, unbiased help is needed.

In May, over 40 members of the congregation gathered in small groups to begin exploring and sharing their individual spiritual journeys. Participants also discussed ways in which the church could add further spiritual value to their lives.

Participants explored the following three questions:

1. **Please tell about some milestone in the history of your personal spiritual story, perhaps a person, an incident, or a period of your life that shaped your thinking or beliefs. How did it happen, and what was the effect on you?**
2. **Everyone's spirituality is different, and people find spiritual support and enrichment in many ways and places. For you, in the current stage of your life, what are your most important sources of spiritual enrichment?**
3. **What might First Parish do that could contribute to your personal spiritual growth or enrichment?**
 - a. **Think about things that might happen right away, or things down the road.**
 - b. **Don't worry about real-world constraints or whether your idea is impractical or likely to be unpopular. Think about what, if we could somehow do it, would add spiritual value for you.**

Responses to the question "What might First Parish do that could contribute to your personal spiritual growth or enrichment" were rich and varied.

Aspects about the **Sunday Service** and **Adult Ed programs/classes** were most often mentioned as well as:

- Small group conversations on Spirituality
- Connections with other houses of worship
- Connections with Nature
- Qualities of the new settled minister
- Retreats
- Outreach/service opportunities
- Youth programs
- Growing the church community
- Various wishes about music
- Aspects about our behavior/culture

The full report contains every single idea and suggestion. We invite you to read it to get a fuller picture of the span of ideas.

[Can-We-Talk-Spirituality-Summary.pdf](#)

The autumn of 2019 was devoted to understanding and appreciating First Parish in Lincoln's denominational roots and unique heritage. Representatives from both of our affiliated denominations delivered sermons and hosted talks with the congregation to highlight the grounding principles of each faith tradition. Additionally, Rev. Rankin provided a sermon series on First Parish Roots and an adult education program that reviewed First Parish History. A FPL history timeline installed in the Stearns Room provided a visual history of our church.

- Rev. Keith Kron: UU Sermon & talk with congregation
- Rev. Vander Hart: UCC Sermon & talk with congregation (link to sermon <https://soundcloud.com/user-880205985>)
- Rev. Jenny Rankin: Sermon Series on FPL Roots
 - Margaret Fuller: Extraordinary, Generous, Seeking (link to sermon <https://soundcloud.com/user-880205985/on-margaret-fuller-may-19-2019>)
 - Roots, Part I: Beginnings of Unitarianism (link to sermon <https://soundcloud.com/user-880205985/roots-the-beginnings-of-unitarianism-sept-22-2019>)
 - Roots, Part II: Beginnings of Unitarianism & Transcendentalism – Language of Relevance (link to sermon <https://soundcloud.com/user-880205985/roots-part-ii-beginnings-of-unitarianism-and-transcendentalism-in-america>)
 - Language of Reverence: Link to sermon <https://soundcloud.com/user-880205985/languages-of-reverence>
- Hands on History: Adult Education review of FPL history lead by Rev. Rankin
- FPL History Timeline in the Stearns Room
- Tea with Church Elders at Newbury Court

In the fall of 2019, we endeavored to create a “family portrait of our spiritual community” exploring personal spirituality through the Spiritual Snapshot Survey.

194 people responded to the survey, not just by checking multiple-choice boxes, but with extensive, insightful, often beautiful comments, providing a bounty of thoughtful reflections on their own spirituality and on First Parish.

We characterized the survey as a “family portrait of our spiritual community,” and that turned out to be pretty appropriate. Think of a snapshot of a large family gathering, maybe your own family. There are the tall people and the short ones; those eager to get in the front row and those who’d prefer to be somewhere else entirely; the smilers and the scowlers and the ones looking away from the camera. Yet there they all are, gathered, and you can almost hear the stories and feel the family ties.

Respondents to the survey provided a bounty of thoughtful reflections on their own spirituality and on First Parish. A few examples:

Spirituality for me is a quality of relationship beginning with the gracious life and death dealing mystery which for lack of a word big enough we call "God." Jesus is the embodiment of that Spirit for me and my central relationship which is inclusive of all people and all creation.

It is important to me to gather with others to consider life from a spiritual standpoint supported by a variety of intellectual, societal, and cultural perspectives. It takes me beyond my own day-to-day and orients me to the wider community and world.

I have found church to be a spiritual home for me, but not at First Parish Lincoln. Too "dead-white-male," 19th C. For me, FPL is the community, the bond of caring for each other and of sharing desire to support good work in the world. But I wouldn't say that is spiritual. My spiritual growth is supported by reading and walking in nature, at the ocean, and in cities.

Spirituality is mostly about love for me -- love the congregation, the experience of the holy in the beloved FPL.

We can characterize the congregation in ways that describe “most” people – meaning more than half. But that usually leaves 10-45% who don’t fit the general description. Moreover,

congregants think about their spirituality in very individually defined ways, and people who choose the same response to a particular survey question vary substantially in their explanatory comments.

- Most congregants consider spirituality important in their lives.
- Most feel that church plays a role, though typically not the “most important” role, in their spirituality. Among FPL activities, most people named the Sunday service and special services as having the most spiritual value for them.
- Most have other spiritual practices, and the practices are quite varied.
- Most were brought up in some Protestant tradition, but not predominantly Congregational or Unitarian. The current orientation leans somewhat more toward Unitarian than Congregational, but many say their primary orientation is something else (such as humanist, earth-centered, Buddhist, agnostic, atheist, or “none”).
- Most believe that a universal spirit or force exists, though many do not choose the term “God.”
- Most like the Covenant and Call to Ministry, often with reservations that focus on particular words (especially “Jesus,” “worship,” and “God”).
- Most like the Covenant and Call to Ministry, often with reservations that focus on particular words (especially “Jesus,” “worship,” and “God”).
- Most find value in our tradition of prayer in the Sunday Service. On this and some other points, people who don't find value for themselves tend to nod to the value that they see the practice has for others in the congregation.

We encourage you to read the full report, which contains all the survey responses: no editing, no redacting, not even “improvements” of spelling or punctuation.

Read on to see more of your fellow parishioners’ richly varied thinking and often divergent points of view. Read slowly – each thought deserves a bit of reflection. And notice not only the many points on which we disagree, but also the deep strain of affection for FPL that runs throughout the pages.

<https://www.fplincoln.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Spiritual-Snapshot-Survey.pdf>

The Transition Team believed there was a lot of useful information in the Spirituality Snapshot Survey, especially in the hundreds of comments that people wrote in. But the responses needed thoughtful interpretation, which was the focus of a dinner/discussion on early January. After enjoying a meal together, about 65 parishioners participated in a discussion of the survey results. Each table of 8 reviewed the responses to two survey questions. No two tables considered the same set of questions.

Participants had a chance to read the many responses to their assigned questions, discuss what they thought was important in those responses, what a candidate minister should know, and what the responses revealed about the values that guide us as a congregation.

After a period of discussion, each table shared their observations and suggestions with the larger group.

The questions discussed covered the following topics:

- The Covenant
- The Call To Ministry
- The use of the word “God” in the Sunday Service
- Feelings about prayer in the Sunday Service
- First Parish activities that hold the most spiritual value
- Elements of the Sunday Service that hold the most spiritual value
- What else fills our souls

A summary of the observations & conclusions from the discussions follows.

Question #14: Each Sunday’s service at First Parish includes our Covenant: “In the love of truth and the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of all.” Which of the following statements comes closest to describing how you experience the Covenant?

Both tables discussing this question observed that most respondents were OK with the general message of the Covenant, but many parishioners still had questions about the meaning of God, Jesus & Truth. Several discussion participants were surprised on the number of respondents who mentioned being uncomfortable with the use of "God" and "Jesus."

One table noted that we all have our own understandings of covenant – we are all curious

It was suggested that we, as a congregation, explore the words of the Covenant together.

Question #15: Each Sunday's service includes our Call to Ministry: "We go forth from the worship of God to be faithful to the vision of Jesus, to affirm each person's dignity, and to cherish the living earth." Which of the following statements best describes how you experience the Call to Ministry?

Both tables observed that, while most respondents believed in the major ideas of the Call to Ministry, there is a wide range of strong feelings and reactions to the use of the word "God" and the "Vision of Jesus" in the Call to Ministry, which we need to pay attention to. And the new minister needs to as well.

One table wondered how we can more fully embrace the diversity of beliefs in our community, traditional Christian beliefs (Jesus, God...) and the wider range of beliefs (Buddhist, Muslim, Naturistic, ...)? Perhaps offer opportunities for exploration such as classes, workshops, sermons to explore our diverse beliefs and to help us embrace the diversity?

That table also felt that we have a broad spectrum of believing and we journey in many ways. We need to be collectively supportive of the rich variety of our spiritual journeys.

One table wondered if we should develop a common spiritual language.

There was a strong recommendation for thoughtful sermons & readings to help us think wider & challenge us to think more about the Call to Ministry. *

*Note: In response to these suggestions and other input, Rev. Rankin and student minister, Sarah Klockowski offered a sermon series that fully explored the Covenant and the Call to Ministry in early 2021.

Question #16: The Sunday service often refers to "God." How do you feel about this?

Discussion participants noted that there is a broad acceptance of many faiths and that members of our church value the search for God.

We, as a congregation have a broad definition of God, yet are not afraid to talk about it. There is a general acceptance of the divine – in a variety of forms.

Some participants would have a problem with eliminating the word God from the service

It was noted that the issue of gender of God was not that important to survey respondents and that there was no mention of trinitarian.

Question #18: The Sunday service includes several types of prayers. Which of the following statements comes closest to your feeling about prayer in the Sunday service?

Participants noted that prayer is important to us and is an important part of the service to most respondents. They noted that there is a lot of diversity in the way we each pray.

They added that we are all part of an ongoing spiritual quest and are working together toward being more centered.

Some thought that we define prayer too narrowly and observed that what we do in church is not the only way to pray.

Participants noted that many respondents find the deacon & lay prayers to be inspirational and that nature is a strong theme.

It was observed that our church has lots of people coming from lots of different directions at any point of time. For a larger institution, this is easier to absorb. For a smaller church it's more apparent.

Many mentioned the amount of caring & community that is expressed every Sunday in the Service. Not just to each other but focusing on making a difference in the world

One table suggested that the topic of prayer would make for an interesting class, Small Group or roundtable discussion.

Question #19: Which one of the following First Parish activities has the most Spiritual Value for you? Which has the second most? Third most?

Discussion participants observed that the Sunday Service provides high spiritual value to many parishioners, which made them wonder why church attendance is not higher.

It was noted that the three most mentioned activities all occur in the Sanctuary:

- Attending Sunday morning service
- Attending special services
- Attending services around life events

Some were surprised that Small Groups were not mentioned more often for providing spiritual value.

Question # 20: Which one of the following elements of the Sunday morning Service has the most spiritual value for you? Which as the second most spiritual value for you? Third most?

In addition to thought provoking sermons and readings, discussion participants noted that being gathered in a spiritual community with children provided high spiritual value to many respondents. Table discussions often mentioned the words community and connectiveness.

Both Tables focused on this question also noted how often inspirational music was mentioned.

Each table was asked to summarize the Values that they picked up from participants' comments for the two questions they discussed. Listed below are the Values reported by each of the tables. This list has not been organized or prioritized – it is shared in the format in which it was reported by the facilitator.

- Nature
- Community
- Children
- Traditions (Call to Ministry & Covenant)
- Diversity
- Variety (not a fixed diet every Sunday – like the variety)
- Music
- Worship & other parts of the Service
- Diversity of thought
- Change is healthy – good – inevitable
- Community
- Spiritual replenishment
- Non-doctrinal
- Inclusive
- Tradition
- Children
- Being diverse together
- Nature
- Introspection/Self Reflection
- Intellectual/analytical/critical
- Community looking inward & reaching outward
- Traditions
- Diversity of beliefs
- Children
- Social Justice
- Community
- Spiritual curiosity
- Entitlement
- Spirituality & Inclusiveness
- Care about the details of the Order of Service
- Liberal spirituality
- Curiosity
- Thoughtfulness/Diversity of religious backgrounds & beliefs
- Lifelong learning
- Freedom to question
- Religious freedom to be who we are
- Language matters
- Spiritual courage
- Tolerance/respect
- Value sacred space & time (sanctuary)
- Space and time for gathering
- Social Justice
- Diversity of thinking

A good portion of our interim period has been dedicated to working together to understand the identity of First Parish, or “who we are.” A focus on Identity helped us in many ways; to re-center ourselves after a difficult last ministry, to adapt to a tumultuous national environment, and to conduct a search for a new settled minister.

Values are a major dimension of any congregation’s identity. Our values are about how we as a congregation live and try to live, what we stand for, and why, as individuals, we choose to be part of First Parish. Understanding and communicating our values accurately is essential to achieve a good match with ministerial candidates, and even to welcome potential new members. To initiate the ministerial search, we are invited to answer questions like: “Describe and provide examples of how your Congregation lives its values.”

The Transition Team led a series of workshops in early 2020 in which members of the congregation discussed their own views of First Parish values. We had planned to present a summary of the workshop discussions to a larger forum to get the perspectives of people who could not attend the small-group discussions. Covid-19 interrupted that plan, so we regrouped in the fall of 2020 by asking the congregation for their opinions via email and in a discussion held in early October.

After the service on Sunday, October 4th, dozens of parishioners gathered virtually to understand the Transition plans for the year and to engage in a thoughtful discussion of a set of proposed Values statements and descriptions. The proposed statements attempted to synthesize themes that emerged in the Values Workshops and the Spirituality Snapshot Survey, as well as in earlier documents such as the Shared Ministry Review, the Vision 2020, and previous surveys and discernments.

Participants were asked if the following draft statements reflected their view of First Parish Values or if any Values were missing.

Nourishing spirituality

We consider spirituality important in our individual lives and central to our life as a congregation. We have diverse spiritual and religious beliefs and perspectives: we try to celebrate and learn from that diversity. We rely on the Sunday morning service to nourish our spirituality through prayer and meditation, music and ceremony, and messages that teach and inspire. We seek spiritual growth in small groups that learn, meditate, and discuss. We strive to foster spiritual and ethical development in our children and youth.

Sharing a welcoming, loving community

Our Sunday service is a community experience. We value being together, and we find joy in welcoming others. While we do not have the demographic diversity we would like, we value diversity greatly and gently suggest that with our rainbow chairs. We love our youth, honor our elders, and appreciate the efforts of our young families. We show up for one another, especially during those vulnerable times when help is needed with food or flowers, cards or warm words. We rally quickly during crisis to set up phone chains and make sure no member is going unheard or unnoticed.

Serving our neighbor

As individuals, in groups, and as a congregation we strive to love our neighbor in tangible ways. Long-standing and *ad hoc* groups offer meals for people experiencing homelessness, Christmas gifts where there might be none, music and cheer in nursing homes and prison, and food and clothing drives in community emergencies. We support and encourage individual congregants working for causes of their own choosing, be it an orphanage in Africa or a campaign against racism. As a congregation, we make grants to enhance nearby organizations' ability to serve vulnerable populations. Most recently, our actions have shown renewed passion and advocacy for social justice.

Cherishing the Living Earth

We are a community in and of nature, surrounded by trees, fields, ponds, and hiking trails. We value the pastoral beauty of our location and draw upon it to feed our spiritual lives. Many of our favorite hymns use the symbolism of nature. Our Sunday sermons draw upon it. Cherishing the living earth includes but goes beyond our green action programs. It is the breath we take to feed our souls; it gives us the strength to nourish our spirituality, to be a loving welcoming community, and to serve our neighbor.

Additionally, the discussions discussed the "Serving our Neighbor" value. Participants were asked for suggestions on the name of the value and were asked what that Value meant to them – community service, social justice or a blend of the two?

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK ON PROPOSED FPL VALUES

- Nourishing spirituality
- Sharing a welcoming, loving community
- Serving our Neighbor
- Cherishing the Living Earth

Are these four Values, in your view, central First Parish Values?

Are there other values that you think are more central?

Serving our Neighbor

How would you suggest we name and describe the “Serving our Neighbor” value?

What does that Value mean to you? Community Service, Social Justice, or a blend of the two?

COMMENTS ON QUESTION 1: FOUR VALUES

Many participants felt that the statements, as proposed, accurately capture the Values of First Parish.

Others proposed changes:

- Most often mentioned was the desire to strengthen the language of “Serving Our Neighbor” to reflect a bolder and more proactive commitment to justice.
- Many participants felt that our Christian heritage needs to be emphasized in our Values Statement.
- Our commitment to helping young families grow and develop was another important part of FPL that many felt should be included in our Values.
- Finally, some noted a love of learning & seeking knowledge (both adult and youth) is missing from the statement.

Comments on “Nourishing Spirituality”

The desire to emphasize our Christian heritage was a consistent theme of many comments about “Nourishing Spirituality”. Several participants noted that “Jesus”, “Christ” and “God” are in our Covenant and Call to Ministry but are absent from the proposed Values Statement.

The sentence “We seek spiritual growth in small groups that learn, meditate, and discuss” prompted feedback. Participants often pointed out that the term “Small Groups” has two meanings at FPL. As one participant noted, “Staff lead classes, the Meditation Group, Adult Education programs and other educational/discussion forums help foster spiritual growth. “Small Groups”, while valued by many in the church, have typically not evolved into vehicles for spiritual growth.”

Our commitment to supporting youth programs and young families was also noted by several participants as a strong value that needs more emphasis.

Comments on “Sharing a Welcoming, Loving Community”

The sentence “While we do not have the demographic diversity we would like, we value diversity greatly and gently suggest that with our rainbow chairs” prompted some discussion. One person suggested:

“We want to continue to educate ourselves in how to be real advocates for understanding structural racism. With greater real understanding will come real diversity”

Another idea:

"We value diversity greatly and suggest that with our rainbow chairs. We are working hard to make sure our welcome is sincerely felt by all."

Some mentioned that “Pastoral Care” should be included in the description.

Comments on Cherishing the Living Earth

Just a few comments – but some felt that the verb “Cherishing” was too passive and should be replaced or accompanied by a word that indicates action and urgency. Perhaps “Protecting” or “Restoring”.

COMMENTS ON QUESTION 2: “SERVING OUR NEIGHBOR”

One value or two?

Much of the conversation unfolded in ways that suggested a distinction between the domains of “community service” and “social justice.” None of the comments expressed a feeling that either of these two concepts should be excluded, and some explicitly argued that it is important to include both. One participant asked whether it would be appropriate to have five values rather than four.

Naming the value

While some participants expressly liked “Serving our Neighbor” as a name, others had concerns that included:

- Doesn’t explicitly recognize social justice.
- Not strong enough. Sounds static, abstract – needs to suggest action, pro-active.
- Sounds parochial, more local than we are. Doesn’t define “neighbor.”
- “Serving” sounds passive, patronizing. Should be more about alliance and partnership.
- Needs to indicate willingness to respond to needs we see.
- Needs to suggest that we’re striving for justice, standing for peace and kindness along with service and support and in a wider realm of concern beyond our locale.

Several possible words or phrases were suggested:

- Loving our neighbor
- Working as accomplices for social justice
- Serving our Neighbor and Strengthening Social Justice
- Serving our Neighbor and Striving for Social Justice
- “Supporting” instead of “Serving” our neighbor

Value description

Many of the comments about the name of the value also apply to the value’s description. Some, for example, felt a need for more emphasis on social justice, perhaps putting that concept first in the list. Some hoped for stronger, “bolder” statements of FPL actions. One suggested phrase was that we “recognize our responsibility” rather than “support and encourage” action.

Some participants spoke of activities that, in their view, FPL should be doing but is not currently doing sufficiently:

- Activities outside the church
- Being “more active activists”
- Rising to the occasion – marches, demonstrations
- More emphasis on our own country while need is so great, rather than wider world
- Coordinated education or action efforts with other churches and community organizations

TOPICS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

Some of the groups’ discussions of “Serving Our Neighbor” noted areas in which the emphasis of FPL’s values seems unclear. The comments implicitly suggest that it would be useful to clarify these points, although no particular processes were suggested for achieving clarity.

Dimensions include:

- The geographic focus of our “neighborhood” – that is, the relative emphasis on Lincoln, surrounding communities, the nation, and the world.
- The relative emphasis on direct action by parishioners vs. financial donations from the church.
- The emphasis on actions or positions taken by individuals or groups of congregants who do not officially represent First Parish vs. those taken under the official aegis of FPL. One participant hoped that individuals would be encouraged on matters of social justice but “not made to feel guilty.”

Another important topic for discussion is our commitment to Christianity. Several participants noted that our Christian roots are reflected in our Covenant and Call to Ministry but are absent from the Value statements.

A further topic for discussion is politics: what do we do when our values may intersect with issues of local or national politics on which congregants’ views differ? One participant noted that “I hope FPL can be a safe space in which we have passionate discussion of events, our values, and possible actions.”

Another topic identified for future discussion is how effectively we are meeting these values.

As 2020 approached its end, First Parish gathered to consider its future. After the service on December 6th, parishioners met in small groups to share thoughts on a Vision for the church 5-10 years from now. Members reaffirmed or provided feedback on aspirations identified as part of the Vision2020 project in 2017.

The facilitators of the small-group discussions all reported that their discussions were lively and participants were engaged. Translation: this being First Parish in Lincoln, we all have opinions and we are not shy about expressing them!

Provided below is a summary of feedback and suggestions.

#1 To be a community that celebrates, grieves, grows, learns and serves together

Participants generally felt that this statement is appropriate as far as it goes, but some mentioned other concepts that they would like to see added or highlighted. These include:

- A **spiritual** community
- A **diverse, inclusive, welcoming** community
- A **respectful, loving, caring** community

#2 To provide a religious and spiritual home that supports and inspires us individually and collectively, drawing from Christian and other spiritual traditions. To be a spiritual center for people from all faiths and no faith at all.

The term “Christian” attracted the most attention. Some participants felt that the phrasing over-emphasizes Christianity and under-values other spiritual approaches valued in FPL. Others argued that Christianity is central in FPL’s heritage and must be acknowledged.

Several participants were uncomfortable with the term “no faith at all”.

#3 To act upon our shared values to have a positive impact in the wider world. To work for social, economic and environmental justice. To form a deep and meaningful partnership and connection with those we serve. To be a beacon of hope for our community.

While no one objected to having a positive impact in the wider world, many participants hoped to see greater emphasis or specificity regarding particular areas of impact. Multiple people mentioned:

- More emphasis on social justice

Vision

- Emphasizing general environmental protection as well as the social justice aspect of environmental action
- More emphasis on having impact locally

#4 To encourage our children, each other and our community to learn, seek truth, discern and act upon moral principles and grow in spirituality. To actively engage with the wider community in our educational, musical, activist and other programming.

Many participants applauded this statement, particularly for its emphasis on “children,” and some wished for more emphasis on children and youth in previous statements.

As one participant noted in an email after the session, many people wanted to rework the particular wording or the emphasis of individual statements. “If there are only four statements, well, they have to be perfect. . . people want to get the wording about our joint UU/UCC affiliation right, and they want it to appeal to everyone from recovering Catholics to staunch atheists. In one sentence. Or half of a sentence. You can’t do that . . .” (He was kind enough to add some suggestions.)

Each iteration, each gathering, and each discussion helped to sharpen and hone a description of First Parish. Specific themes and messages were refined and strengthened, and the picture of First Parish became more focused.

We spent time trying to capture that picture into a concise set of words or statements and invited several rounds of feedback on each of the descriptions. Eventually, we found that feedback and suggestions were more about nuance, word choice or emphasis than substantial disagreement or differences over content. It became clear that no particular set of words will ever seem perfect to everyone and we realized that the exact words might change slightly over time as the congregation moves forward with the Strategic Plan and the Search.

In March, the Transition Team presented a “Final for Now” statement of Values, Mission and Vision.

The Transition Team considers it a living document that describes our Values, how we live those Values and the Future we are working toward. We think that it captures the essence of First Parish and establishes a strong direction for the Search Committee and Strategic Planning work.

The following statement will be published with the Values, Mission and Vision to provide context and to tie our current statements to First Parish’s historic Covenant and Call to Ministry.

The current First Parish in Lincoln resulted from a 1942 merger of Lincoln’s Congregational and Unitarian churches. That merger is reflected in Christian and Humanist elements of our Sunday services, and in our intent to be a “big tent” spiritual home for persons of all faith backgrounds.

Our historic roots are quite visible each Sunday as the congregation recites a Covenant and a Call to Ministry:

Covenant: In the love of truth and the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of all.

Call to Ministry: We go forth from the worship of God to be faithful to the vision of Jesus, to affirm each person’s dignity, and to cherish the living earth.

First Parish’s statement of Values, Mission, and Vision complements and elaborates on the core concepts of the Covenant and Call to Ministry in a way that reflects our big spiritual tent. This statement, which describes what FPL tries to do and hopes to be, follows below.

First Parish in Lincoln Values, Mission, and Vision

The Core Values of First Parish are:	To live out our values and achieve our vision, the Mission of First Parish is:	The Vision for First Parish is:
Promoting <u>spiritual growth</u> and <u>connection</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * To gather for prayer and meditation, inspirational teachings, music and ceremony, and for the celebration of nature and the divine. * To build on our Unitarian and Congregational heritage by exploring, sharing, and learning from a wide variety of spiritual and faith traditions. * To grow in spirituality by encouraging our children, each other, and our faith community to seek truth, learn, and act according to high moral principles. 	To be a spiritual home for individuals from diverse faith backgrounds where each person can find help and inspiration to foster personal growth on their own journey while in community with others.
Building <u>community</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * To welcome people from a wide variety of backgrounds and to find common ground in our shared humanity. * To gather, physically and virtually, in ways that help us to know, understand and respect each other. * To celebrate and grieve together as we mark the important events and transitions in our lives. * To care for each other with love and support in difficult times and circumstances. 	To be an open and inclusive community that learns to trust and work with each other as we celebrate, grieve, grow, support, and serve together.
Pursuing <u>social justice</u> and <u>human dignity</u> ; Preserving the <u>living earth</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * To pursue social justice by learning, understanding how and where we can make a difference, and then acting. * To seek environmental protection and justice through actions and advocacy. * To pro-actively serve and engage with our neighbors by our hands-on actions, cooperative work, and donations. 	To be a source of hope and positive impact in our communities, our region and beyond by affirming the dignity of all peoples and caring for the living earth.

A Strategic Planning Process provides a roadmap that will help First Parish chart out ways to fulfill our Mission and become the vibrant and impactful church that we envision. It will allow us to prioritize our resources, align us to a common plan and focus our energy on key choices. The discussions will help us gain clarity on how to move toward the future we desire.

Additionally, many congregations use this time in an interim period to proactively review their financial health and sustainability before welcoming a new settled minister.

At the beginning of the 2020/2021 church year, the Parish Committee approved the creation of a Strategic Planning Process and made the process part of the Transition Team's effort, ensuring consistency of direction and message.

To encourage an informed discussion on a strategic plan, Chris Andrysiak, Gary Taylor, John Krzywicki and Peter Hussey researched the current national and local landscape of organized religion, demographic data for the Town of Lincoln, and FPL membership trends and current financial health. They evaluated our real estate and considered creative ways to use these assets more productively. They uncovered success stories of churches like First Parish, that had found creative ways to grow and thrive. This information was shared with the congregation in late March, providing important background information for the church leadership and the congregation to use when considering several strategies for our future. During the month of May, a series of small roundtables are being offered to help parishioners better understand and weigh in on several possible paths toward our envisioned future. This aspect of the team's work will continue into the next church year, and we expect that the Strategic Planning Team will issue one or more reports summarizing its work.

The Parish Committee will need to take action at the beginning of the 2021/2022 church year to continue the Strategic Planning Process on its own.

The background and executive summary sections of the Strategic Planning Roundtable Summary Report are provided in the next few pages.

Strategic Planning Roundtables – Background

- During May 2021, the strategic planning committee conducted a series of 9 roundtables, addressing the long-term future of FPL. The roundtables were one workstream in a much broader strategic planning project
- Each roundtable was facilitated by a member of the strategic planning committee and notes were taken by another member of the committee
 - A very simple topical guide was used to facilitate the discussion, but the format was structured to encourage open-ended consideration of broad and pressing issues
- In total, 41 parishioners participated in these 90-minute sessions
 - There were many past and present committee chairs, members of the Parish Committee, Deacons, leaders of RE, and others deeply involved and committed to FPL, along with others with lower levels of involvement
 - The discussions were open, well informed and in depth
 - Relatively poorly represented were parents of families with children of school age or younger

Strategic Planning Roundtables – Executive Summary

Our Long-Term Future. Given trends in religious participation both nationally and locally, the aging of Lincoln’s population and FPL’s membership, and the steady decline in FPL pledge participation¹, there is widespread concern that in a decade or so we may lose critical mass (100 or fewer members, down from our peak of 300) if we do not do something to resist the tides. During May 2021, the strategic planning committee conducted a series of 9 roundtables (41 participants), addressing questions concerning the long-term future of FPL. The roundtables were one workstream in a much broader strategic planning project².

Investing in Growth. Participants were asked: *Are we willing to invest more in order to attempt to reverse the membership trend – with our time, our financial contributions or a draw above 4 percent of our endowment?*

Trend data on pledge counts and amounts over time were shared.

- There was broad support for making smart, targeted, strategic investments in growth, including an endowment draw over 4 percent if necessary. Strategic investments of volunteer time will also be needed. This will likely require broadening the volunteer base, as many believe that the current core group of volunteers may not have additional capacity.

¹ It must be noted happily that the 2021-2 stewardship campaign resulted in an increase in both pledging units and overall donations.

² These questions were chosen due to their potential relevance to the search for a new minister.

Strategic Planning Roundtables – Executive Summary (cont.)

Areas of focus. Participants were asked: *Which programmatic components do we most need, to ensure FPL remains vibrant and financially strong for another generation? Which elements should be particularly strong in our new settled minister?*

- There was strong concurrence that community outreach will be key to our holding and growing our Parishioner base. There was overwhelming agreement that the new settled minister will be the most important single factor in our long-term success, and that the minister should have more emphasis on community engagement than has been true in the past. In addition, engaging sermons and Sunday services were seen as foundational prerequisites for the minister.

Demographic Focus. Participants were asked *which of five demographic groups should we actively target: elderly, recently retired, empty nesters, parents with high school children, parents with young children?*

The most common theme was we should target two groups: recently retired and empty nesters/50+ who may have time, interest and energy to devote to the church. Although participants recognized the challenges in attracting families with young children, there was strong agreement that this group is important for the church's future.

The full Strategic Planning Roundtable report can be found here: [Strategic Planning Roundtable Report](#)

KEY LEARNINGS AND TOPICS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

The congregation has achieved a tremendous amount in the past three years. We've healed a great deal from a number of hurts, discussed many important topics and have become comfortable with several formats of discussion that involve reflection, sharing and listening. We've explored our individual spirituality. We've created a set of Vision, Mission and Value statements that set a direction for our future and provide a good description of our church. We have much to be proud of and are a stronger church because of this work.

It is in the spirit of continually strengthening First Parish that the Transition Team shares several key learnings and identifies topics for future discussions. We've indicated some topics that fall under the responsibility of the Parish Committee and others that we recommend the Search Committee consider as part of their work in the fall.

ACKNOWLEDGE AND DISCUSS TOPICS WHERE THERE ARE STRONG DIFFERENCES OF OPINIONS

First Parish is proud to be a collection of individuals with differing beliefs, preferences, and perspectives. As with any diverse organization, members may have a range of opinions on almost any given topic, which can lead to disagreement and even conflict. Disagreements are an inevitable part of any normal and healthy congregation and how we handle those differences is important. Not addressing persistent issues where there are strong and differing opinions can lead to misunderstanding, mistrust, and divisions within the church. Not providing an opportunity for public discussion causes conversations to move “to the parking lot” where opinions can fester and promote the creation of invisible fault lines.

The Transition Team and Rev. Rankin have helped the Parish identify, acknowledge, and bring to a public forum many topics where there is persistent or strong disagreement and conflict. We are learning to be a church that is comfortable discussing subjects where differing opinions exist and should continue to exercise and practice bringing contentious topics to the surface.

CONTINUE TO USE DISCUSSION TECHNIQUES THAT ENCOURAGE REFLECTION, SHARING AND LISTENING

The past three years have been a productive time of self-reflection and growth. With Rev. Rankin’s strong guidance, the Transition Team’s approach has largely involved congregation-wide processes that encouraged people to express their own feelings and listen to understand how other congregants feel.

The Listening Circle and similar approaches appear to have been helpful in the past three years. Participants stated that the discussions helped them understand other’s points of view and, sometimes, made them think differently about a topic.

The Transition Team recommends that First Parish continue to offer discussions using approaches like that of the Listening Circles or World Café to get input or feedback on a range of topics, and especially to help the Congregation process an issue or surface areas of disagreement.

Some topics that have had persistent areas of disagreement are listed at the end of the report. These are topics that some have called “sacred cows”; without discussion they will fester. With all the work that needs to be done in the next year, these topics do not demand immediate attention, but should be intentionally discussed sometime in the future.

FOSTER A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE COMMUNITY

We need to ensure that our culture, behavior, practices, and governance structures support the development of the diverse, welcoming, inclusive, safe and impactful church that we envision.

The topic of safety and trust surfaced repeatedly in the Listening Circles, the Leadership Retreat and the discussions about Values and Vision.

Rev. Rankin also reports that the safety (or lack of safety) of the FPL culture is a concern that she hears from our church leaders as well as from long time and newer members of the church. Parishioners express concern that they will be criticized or talked about if they speak up honestly or put forth a different idea, opinion or approach. How can we create a community that encourages – and supports – a diversity of voices and points of view?

Creating a safe community involves an honest assessment of our culture, behavior and paths of communications.

Creating an inclusive community requires safe and clearly defined methods for parishioners to ask questions, express opinions and feel heard. An inclusive community provides ways for marginalized voices to be recognized and new ideas to be considered. It requires each of us to pause when we hear ourselves say or think “That’s not how we do things” and be open to change, new or opposing ideas and new approaches.

Being an open and welcoming community has long been a priority for First Parish. Many UCC and UUA churches are striving to be inclusive as well as welcoming. Many churches are undertaking comprehensive self-studies to reflect on issues of safety, inclusion, race and culture within the life, practice governance and policies of their parish. These audits include all aspects of congregational life and organizations. Both denominations offer tools and examples of audits designed to help churches determine near-term or on-going changes in thinking, governance, and practice to become more welcoming and inclusive. Some tools use a lens of anti-racism or white supremacy/privilege to make these assessments, which is an approach for First Parish to consider.

The Governance Task Force recently examined our governance model, but if we take another look at our structures considering safety and inclusion, what might we learn?

First Parish should undertake a comprehensive audit of our congregational life and church organization to identify opportunities to become a more welcoming, safe, and inclusive community and to position our church for the future.

CONTINUE TO EXAMINE OUR FORMAL AND INFORMAL POWER STRUCTURES AND SYSTEMS

For a new minister coming in, is it clear where their authority lies and its boundaries? Lack of clarity on where power and decision-making authority lies between the Parish Committee, Minister, Deacons, committees and lay people seemed to be one of the areas which undermined the success of Rev. Mishra-Marzetti’s ministry. We need to be sure that this has been adequately addressed.

What can a new minister make decisions on? What sorts of things do they need to collaborate on and with whom? Is it clear what needs to go to the Parish Committee for decisions? In First Parish, many members look to the PC for decisions, not the minister. Rev. Rankin reports that many UUA ministers consider their normal realm of authority to include decisions on a broad range of topics. How would that behavior be perceived at First Parish?

To what extent do we want our new minister to “lead” and to what extent do we prefer for our new minister to focus on good sermons, pastoral care and working with the staff, letting lay leaders “lead”? Will we welcome our new minister leading on social issues, fundraising, the capital campaign, or general strategic issues of the parish, or will we take affront? What is the relationship between the Parish Committee and the minister?

How do we resolve unanticipated issues? The Governance Task force published a report, organization chart and User Manual that document and explain the current formal governance structure of First Parish. This documentation is a valuable resource for the Parish and provides broad guidelines. We also need an understanding of how to resolve the inevitable unanticipated issues.

Some relatively recent case studies (both significant and minor) could serve as examples of the type of topics that can arise.

- The rainbow chairs
- The solar panels
- Signage in general, the BLM banner in particular
- Asking the congregation for money on a particular item vs. general policy of leaving all fundraising up to the stewardship campaign
- How the bulletin board space in the Stearns Room is allocated
- Making changes to the Order of Service or other aspects of the Sunday Service

Examine our informal power systems. Problems can occur when the opinions and influence of some long-time (and well respected) members or those who are a “squeaky wheel” drive decisions and direction for the church that circumvent the accepted governing and decision-making structures. When small groups of members or a couple of individuals take matters into their own hands and overrun a formal process, it is frustrating to those who are following procedure, can be confusing to the congregation, and can set the stage for conflict. An honest

assessment and increased awareness of the impact of our informal power systems should be part of the continuing examination of our governance model.

Reassess the Bylaws in context of the Values, Mission & Vision statements. Since the Governance Task Force reviewed the First Parish Bylaws, the congregation has adopted a set of Value, Mission and Vision statements which reflect the congregation’s current view of First Parish identity. The Bylaws should be reassessed in the context of these statements.

Finally, we need to find ways **to develop, encourage, and support the next generation of leaders.**

DEVELOP A DELIBERATE STRATEGY TO ACHIEVE OUR VISION

One of our Vision Statements is “To be a source of hope and positive impact in our communities our region and beyond by affirming the dignity of all peoples and caring for the living earth.”

Now that we have agreed on that aspiration, how do we decide — and keep deciding and adjusting over time — what the Vision means and how we implement it. Moving toward our Vision entails developing a coordinated and deliberate strategy for our outwardly facing efforts including Outreach, advocacy, community service and environmental initiatives.

Outreach: Outreach is a source of great pride and importance to many in the church. It is the reason why some members belong to First Parish; members of the Outreach Committee devote a great deal of time and energy to the work and are justly proud of the positive impact that FPL's donations have had on many worthy organizations.

Some parishioners, however, would prefer different approaches, such as putting more emphasis on hands-on help than financial donations, or forming partnerships with other organizations where we contribute both financially and with hands-on help. Others would like to donate to causes of their own choosing rather than giving money for the church to donate. These divergent opinions (and others) may stem from differing philosophies about how FPL should relate to the outside world. Some may partly reflect limited understanding of Outreach strategy, focus and processes, as well as the nature of funding for Outreach contributions (for the past several years about \$15K has come from the operating budget, which is about 2% of the budget). Such topics have not been addressed directly in our recent congregation-wide conversations. Given the importance of Outreach to parishioners, the Transition Team recommends that the development of FPL’s Vision And Strategy include some broad congregation-wide conversations about the philosophy, funding, strategy, and processes of Outreach and related efforts.

Impact: Some in the church have expressed a strong desire to be a source of hope and positive impact in the Lincoln community. Others see the need for more regional or world-wide impact. Many have expressed the desire to nurture a long term and meaningful partnership and alliance with a few well-chosen organizations or programs. Others prefer the flexibility of addressing the most pressing needs in the region at any given time. Many have expressed the desire for more hands-on work in addition to financial support. All approaches are valuable, appreciated, and important. How do we frame our deliberate strategy and approach for the future?

Support for causes: How do we decide what we support under the aegis of First Parish and how should we handle causes that are of interest to a subset of congregants but objected to by others?

FOCUS ON “WHO IS OUR NEIGHBOR?”

While the Transition Team helped the congregation explore many important topics, the topic of “Who is our Neighbor” still needs to be considered. This work involves decisions about the alliances, relationships, and partnerships that First Parish wants to build and nurture. Deliberate discussions would help each of us and church leadership understand the congregation’s opinions, motivations, and thoughts about important relationships:

- What kind of relationship do we want with our affiliated denominations?

It is unclear how much connection to the two denominations is desired by First Parish. Up to this point, there has not been much contact with the two denominations. We pay our dues every year, but parishioners generally do not attend national assemblies, local meetings or many of the educational webinars that are offered on worship, fundraising, small group ministry, religious education. We tend to create our own materials and approaches. Lately we have turned to the denominations for help with racial justice efforts and we will be utilizing their resources during the Search. However there seems to be a fair amount of ambivalence about connection to the two denominations.

- What kind of relationships do we want to have with other houses of worship?

In the past, First Parish has enjoyed close and meaningful relationships with one or two specific churches in Boston. Some members of the church would like to see those connections rekindled and nurtured. Some members have expressed the hope that FPL will connect with other houses of worship in Lincoln.

- Which organizations or programs outside of First Parish do we want to partner with?

Are there organizations or programs that we want to form a partnership or alliance with? Any relationships that we want to nurture and work with over a long period of time?

TOPICS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION – SEARCH COMMITTEE

OUR LEARNINGS SINCE MANISH'S DEPARTURE

Candidates are likely to ask the Search Committee about Rev. Mishra-Marzetti's ministry and how it ended, reflections on what might have been done differently and what we have learned as well as changes that have been put in place. What will the Search Committee say and what will their answer be based upon? The past three years have provided an opportunity for a great deal of learning and re-learning. It may be important for the congregation to discuss before the Search Committee meets with candidates.

PREPARE TO HELP OUR NEW MINISTER SUCCEED AND THRIVE (SEARCH COMMITTEE & PC)

The Listening Circles revealed many thoughts about First Parish's role and responsibility in the failed ministry with Rev. Mishra-Marzetti. Many parishioners recognized that we each had differing hopes about what we wanted in a minister. Some folks had unspoken expectations of a new minister, such as how fast change can occur, how much attention the minister pays to committees, how many church gatherings the minister should attend and thoughts about a minister's scope of authority.

Additionally, many recognized that there was, and still is, no process for the congregation to give on-going, immediate feedback to the minister.

This important piece of work would include discussions with the congregation to help identify and address topics such as:

- What we expect of him/her/them (Search Committee)
- What are our unspoken expectations or individual hopes? (Search Committee)
- What they might reasonably expect of us
- What kind of process do we need to get the minister and congregation on the same page with expectations? (PC topic)
- How do we create a good feedback loop for the congregation to provide feedback to the minister (and vice-versa)? (PC topic)

It is also important that the congregation learn about and discuss our collective and individual role and responsibility in the partnership of creating a successful ministry.

ADDITIONAL TOPICS FOR FUTURE DISCUSSION

Members of the Transition Team and Rev. Rankin have heard differences of opinion within the congregation on several topics. Deliberate, respectful, and intentional discussion of these topics will help to acknowledge differences, build understanding and provide direction for decisions. With the amount of work to be done during the Search, these topics are not considered urgent, but are important and should be addressed in the future.

- **Politics:** what should be our ground rules about what is and isn't talked about from the pulpit, in adult education, in advocacy-oriented committees.
- **Music:** Some parishioners would appreciate more variety in the music program and some love it just the way it is. Should we learn more about what the congregation would like, with an expectation that congregational preferences would influence the program, or should we leave the program up to the music director and music committee?
- **Small Groups:** Small Groups serve an important function in many churches. Some churches use Small Groups to build membership and connections within the parish. Most require that Small Group configurations be changed every year to allow members to form new relationships. Many are spiritually focused, often focused on a coordinated, church wide theme or message.

Most First Parish Small Groups have had the same membership for years and are critically important to their members, providing an invaluable source of friendship, support, and comfort to those involved.

Rev. Rankin observes that the names of the members of existing Small Groups are currently not made public, even to the Care Committee, which leads to a feeling that the program is shrouded in secrecy. When a Small Group feels they need a new member, they often invite someone to join. This leads to the feeling that Small Groups are closed clubs which are open to some but not open to others.

Rev. Rankin also hears concern about the exclusive nature of the Small Groups and confusion about the connection of Small Groups to the Minister, the Deacons and FPL.

Finding a way to honor the existing groups, but making them more public, while forming new, more dynamic and spiritually oriented groups is a topic to explore.

- **Religious Education:** Over the past few years, First Parish in Lincoln has made a concerted effort to invest in supporting Religious Education and its families by funding a full time Director of Religious Education and trying to be sensitive to the needs and desires of this segment of the church. Despite these efforts, attendance before and during COVID has remained spotty. Some parishioners are concerned about the fact that so few families are connected to the church. Is it possible to increase the number of younger families or is this part of a national trend? What could we do differently, if

anything, to be more successful in this part of church life? How do we survey and listen to families about their needs and desires regarding church? How can we ask them to help us design a program they will value and truly attend?

SINCERE THANKS

As the 2020/2021 church year concludes, the Transition Team is bringing its traditional work to a close. We will proactively help the Search Committee get off to a strong, informed, and productive start and will be by their side as needed during the Search Process.

It has been an incredible three years of introspection and growth. We have been honored with your trust. We have been awed by your dedication, commitment, and level of engagement. We have been incredibly moved by your words, your wisdom, and your honesty. You have worked hard to prepare First Parish for its future. Thank you.