



from the October 2009 issue of *The Spire*

A Shared Vision

by Rev. Douglas S. Stivison, Pastor

Our church constitution requires that each year I share with you my vision for this congregation and my ministry with you. But just as it is absolutely essential for me to articulate my vision, it is equally important that I ask you to consider your vision for the church and to see if we are looking in the same direction. Do we share the same hopes and dreams so that we can help each other along the same spiritual pathway towards the same goals? Can we help each other come closer to God?

We now have shared a faith journey together for two years including worship services, funerals, baptisms, weddings, and so many other activities. And with each shared service and meal and meeting, we have come to know each other better.

Last year I said my vision was for a church where every person — child and adult, visitor and long-term member — would find Jesus in our midst. I still believe with all my heart that this is the kind of church I want us to be.

This year, I want us to reflect on why we are a church and not just any other social or political organization. Specifically what do we mean when we say that we are gathered in the name of Christ? One clear answer to this question comes from our United Church of Christ Statement of Faith: “God, you call us into your church to accept the cost and joys of discipleship.”

“To accept the cost and joys of discipleship.” Everything we do is in response to the call to discipleship. To be disciples of Jesus Christ. To act like disciples of Jesus Christ. To be identified by others as disciples of Jesus Christ.

And what does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?

Jesus tells us exactly what it means to be his disciple. In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

Disciples are ordinary people — like you and me — who demonstrate to themselves, to each other, to the world, and to their creator that they love one another as God has loved them.

Disciples are not identified by their uniforms, badges, handshakes, prayers, education, or symbols...nor by their age, or race, or gender, or language. No, they are identified by how they show their love for one another. And I fervently want us to be the kind of church that is made up of disciples.

My vision for this church is that we all become disciples, true disciples. You. Me. Our children. All of us disciples on Sunday when we gather and all of us disciples when we are apart. Disciples in worship and at home and on the job and in the marketplace. People who are known for the love they show to one another. People whose words reflect their faith in God, and whose every public and private action is motivated by that faith in God and manifests itself in love of one another.

In my vision for our church, we are people who can love one another while we share uplifting worship services, but also in difficult meetings that force us to grapple with divisive issues. People who show their love of God and love of each other in the words they use and the care with which they express themselves.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, we are reminded of the characteristics of this kind of love that we are to show to each other.

“This love of which I speak is slow to lose patience — it looks for a way of being constructive. It is not possessive: it is neither anxious to impress, nor does it cherish inflated ideas of its own importance. Love has good manners, and does not pursue selfish advantage. It is not touchy. It does not keep account of evil, or gloat over the wickedness of other people. On the contrary, it shares the joy of those who live by the truth. Love knows no limit to its endurance, no end to its trust, no fading of its hope; it can outlast anything. Love never fails...” (J. B. Phillips' translation of 1 Cor 13)

I envision a congregation where every member, every visitor, and every stranger can and will find Jesus here in our worship and in our caring for one another in times of trouble. We want everyone to find Jesus here when we celebrate and when we console each other; to find Jesus in our fellowship and in our genuine hospitality. We want everybody to find Jesus here even when the going gets rough and when the path is neither easy nor straight.

And I envision a congregation in which we continually become such strong disciples that people can't bear to be away from here. To be such strong disciples that the example of love that we show to each other instructs our children, overcomes all of our differences, and acts as a beacon to others. My vision for this congregation is for each of us, in our deepest and most personal faith life and in our shared congregational life to reflect Jesus' call:

“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

(This essay is excerpted from Pastor Doug's annual vision sermon delivered on September 13, 2009)