

Hearth, Hope and Hands
A Relational Vision
For
Progressive Faith Communities

PRELIMINARY DRAFT

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to my mother,

Mabel Orene Carr Reynolds

(1922 – 2004)

These qualities come forward when thinking of her. She had a:

Designer's Mind – creative thinking

Prophet's Heart – vision of hope

Dancer's Body – zest for life

Mystic's Faith – soulful wisdom

(These I learned from mother's life example. Thank you mother.)

Underlying and perfused throughout this paper is the spirit of my mother. She lived this vision unselfconsciously. She left it to me to bring the vision into conscious expression. Mother lived to read and appreciate the earliest expression of this vision in 2003. With this paper I offer to the world a legacy of my mother's soul.

A Summary of Relational Vision Practices for Professional Clergy, Staff, and Lay Leaders

Purpose Statement

The practices taught to UU/progressive ministers and staff professionals, and implemented in congregational settings, tend to be policy-based tools for the tasks of organizational dynamics. That lens is needed for guiding and navigating congregations. The practices include mission and vision statements, covenants of right relations, family systems best practices, policy governance, strategic planning and problem-solving, and other essential institutional instruments. Without such well-honed tools in place and properly used, our congregations would suffer organizationally *and* relationally. They would continually undermine the best professional efforts to create healthy faith communities. We must use those tools. However, another lens – one that orients us to practices specific to religious communities -- is missing from current trainings for religious professionals.

Overlooked are the relational practices that attend to the feeling life of the congregation. Policy tools, such as covenants and family systems, make the attempt, but they cannot grow empathy, compassion, inspiration, or meaning. They cannot replace fear, anger, and woundedness with calm, courage, creativity, and commitment. They cannot tap into the human passions. They cannot heal relations, bring hope, bring meaning, and grow souls. To develop these qualities, we need practices grounded in the soul's wisdom and love's potential; practices for individuals, groups, and congregations. The qualities of the feeling life go deeper than values. Building from values will not tap into the "magma" of the inner life. It will not release the flow of our "creative lava." Covenants and family systems can lead us to the overlook, but they cannot carry us down into felt experience. It takes relational practices, intentionally wrought, to live into these sensibilities.

Policy-guided tasks and relational presence need to partner in a dance of mutuality: one from the overlook, the other from the depths. We need both dimensions for the faith community to move to depth as it moves forward in mission. Together, when they are held caringly, the organizational tasks and the feeling lives of congregations can form a “Wise Vessel” that holds and brings nurture, hope, community, and commitment to the their calling and mission. Policy needs ultimately to serve potential in the life of the congregation. Relational practices unfold potential in powerful ways. The practices outlined here evoke potential and cultivate member creativity that do and will, indeed, “build the beloved community.”

This outline summarizes the core set of relational practices. While the practices honor the conceptual systems orientation from the “policy balcony,” they shift attention down to the dance floor of face-to-face relations, and into the basement -- the soul -- of the congregation’s feeling life. In these relational places, experience turns on personal practice and commitment. It is here, in these spaces, that we invite members to grow in depth and vital engagement. Relational practices complement and supplement policy-based organizational tools. They help create safe, supportive spaces that elicit and develop the relational lives of our congregations.

Annotated List of the Relational Practices*

Over the past decade, through consulting and interim ministry settings, I have researched, developed, adapted, and led congregations in the application of several relational practices. I have also continued to study congregational life, further discerning and researching additional practices, including some still in development mode. I hold that all congregations need to follow these practices in order to honor their relational lives and build the beloved community. This paper offers what I consider to be the core relational practices. *Note: This paper will grow into a workbook with examples, stories and illustrations.

Why the Language of Soul and Spirit is Important. By “soul” I refer to the deep feeling life of individuals and their congregations. In this I follow the meanings in the tradition of depth psychology, especially post-Jungian archetypal and spiritual psychology. Soul is not understood here as some inner entity that lives on eternally after one’s death. Soul is, rather, a word signifying the inner life activity of emotional struggles and pain, of feelings of home and love and joy, and the deep, enduring longings that tug at the human heart. Soul not only dwells within us, we dwell within soul. It permeates our bodies with feeling. Soul work is reflective, contemplative inner work of observing, inquiring, and inviting awareness of those feelings through practices of deep and subtle discernment. Soul work awakens potential, our potential. It always involves a softening of sensibilities which includes one’s capacities for intuition and accessing the imagination.

Spirit is understood here in context with diving deeply into soul’s silence, and dwelling there receptively and waiting. Soul is the rich, liminal heartfelt activity of feeling. Spirit is the luminous, energetic impulse that summons us toward wisdom-truth in our beings. The spirit realm invites us into a breadth of becoming that widens and reorients the self to previously undreamt potential and possibilities. Full immersion in and with life opens one to the transcendent visions of human wisdom and creative action, and into spontaneous, authentic presence. Soul’s longings, when well attended, can lead to felt resonances that pulsate with the very dance of life itself. Spirit’s presence invites and evokes the call of vocation and destiny. It inspires us to “dance the authentic dance.” Generative energy emerges from the interplay of soul and spirit in communion. This brings the sacred life of love into its fullness. It is the life we long to nourish in our communities of progressive faith, and in our own lives and relations.

The Relational Practices.

The interplay and mutuality of soul and spirit – feeling, imagery, energy, and presence -- move through every one of the following congregational practices.

- **Congregational Covenants** – The process of creating covenants of shared expectations, values and promises builds openness, trust and respect. Congregational covenants serve as the “centripetal glue” that binds members and staff into a community of trust. As shared affirmations, covenants complement the congregation’s mission by creating the relational context for leadership dialogue and congregational decision making. Covenants ask the questions, “How do we want to work and relate together as a faith community?” and “What promises are we willing to make with each other to sustain authentic community?” There can be several different kinds of covenants in a congregation, but two that center on mutuality and collaboration are the leadership covenant (board and council) and the covenant of right relations. The practices of staying in strong covenantal relationship help cultivate healthy congregational life. It is important that congregations periodically review and evaluate how they are doing in terms of their covenantal commitments.
- **Family Systems Best Practices** – The primary purposes for adapting family systems thinking to congregational life are to manage conflict and develop leaders who are well differentiated and immune to the anxieties that easily erupt into congregational crises. Best practices include avoiding unhealthy triangulation, noticing destructive patterns of reactivity, and attending to underlying anxieties in congregational relations. These practices were first developed as helpful tools to use in diagnosis and treatment in family therapy. Like families, congregations are emotional systems prone to dysfunction during times of stress and distress. The family systems model shifts the focus away from isolating blame -- or identifying “the cause” -- to looking instead at relational dynamics. Systemic effects resemble the moving elements of a hanging mobile that mimics a family’s “stress ballet.” The basic set of family systems best practices helps calm anxiety and brings positive confidence into the adaptive management of congregations and their internal issues.

- **Pastoral Care** – In the feeling life of our congregations the role of the minister and lay pastoral care team comes to the center during times of acute illness, trauma, death, and bereavement. They provide emotional and spiritual care and support, and ensure that those experiencing loss or some other life crisis also receive compassionate support from throughout the congregational community. Emotional and spiritual support and care for the soul of any and all members is likewise offered to those experiencing difficulties on their life’s journey. Pastoral care generally serves as a more individualized or family-oriented expression of attending to the feeling life of the congregation. Yet pastoral care is the “first line of love,” and compassion can transform a congregation.
- **Small Affinity Groups** – The practice of small group ministries (or covenant groups) is now commonplace throughout Unitarian Universalism. The need for fellowship, mutuality and belonging is powerful, and small groups provide settings for shared interests and affinity. They have grown to become foundational elements of a robust congregation. However, the current and popular form of small group ministries can be improved upon, if we wish to deepen the feeling life of UU congregations. The present form should be retained because it meets many member needs for a sense of belonging. But a deeper, more contemplative and soulful, form of affinity group would offer a welcome context for faith development and spiritual growth. The emphasis of adding this practice is, thus, for a spiritually grounded model for small groups that supplements the mode of small group formats currently practiced in UU congregations.

There are several well-developed models of spiritually-based small groups, one of which is the UU Wellspring Program. Other excellent examples are Parker J. Palmer’s “Circles of Trust” and Christina Baldwin’s “PeerSpirit Circles.” The inclusion of this annotation for Small Affinity Groups is to highlight the importance of offering a deeper set of options. They point to ways in which congregational

leaders (lay, staff, and clergy) may choose to go deeper. Those we take up in the next two annotations.

- **Soulful Circles©** - Soulful Circles are intentionally quiet relational spaces for “going deep” spiritually and reaping the fruits of shared contemplative presence using liturgy, prayerful contemplation, inquiry, and subtle discernment. These are circles of practice intended to be integral to the spiritual infrastructure of each congregation. One circle per congregation is recommended. Soulful Circles offer a disciplined set of practices for spiritual leaders who commit to those practices for a minimum period in order to experience the potential provided for communion in soulful presence and deep meaning. The primary intention is to ground the spiritual life of the congregation through capacities developed by a few leaders undertaking group soul work. These circles bear no resemblance to therapy. The influence of those leaders will radiate out into the faith community cultivating soul friendships. The frequency of meeting can be set by the leaders, as long as they meet regularly for mutual spiritual support and shared practice. These gatherings feel akin to worshipful prayer in a small group setting. While their emphasis is on contemplation, that practice can occur even in the form of contemplative conversations. All the relational vision practices in this document come into form as features of Soulful Circles.

A sketch of the purpose, character, quality, and format of a Soulful Circle, will include the following considerations: 1) Purpose – to bring attention to the importance of soulful feeling as a medium that moves and dwells within the life of the congregation. 2) Purpose – to provide and conduct practices that help spiritual leaders “grow their souls in depth and capacity.” 3) Purpose – to bring both personal soul-spirit grounding and support, and facilitate interpersonal and group creative spiritual discernment. 4) The practices take the participants into deep, heart-centered, soulful presence with receptive interior attention to their inner feeling life moving with wisdom and meaning.

They will learn that sensing feeling includes the entire congregation and world, and having that sentient awareness is important to building the beloved community. The practitioners touch into their longings that yearn to flow out and influence the faith community. This flow awakens leaders to their untapped gifts, and empowers them to find healing or service or creative expression that can serve the mission of the congregation and the needs of our earth community. Soulful Circles can be thought of as “Wise Vessels” of contemplation and discernment in the congregation. They access wisdom and nurture the heart and soul of the faith community.

- **Spirit Circles©** - The idea for this complement to Soulful Circles came so recently that it is only an idea. It cannot be fleshed out in careful description. But it is, for sure, a necessary and mutual aspect of developing the spiritual life of congregational leaders (lay and professional). If we understand that Soulful Circles bring the soft and empathic forms of Agape Love into a group for quiet inner work, then we need to recognize that a congregation also needs a spiritual setting for cultivating Creative Love or Eros as “to love or desire ardently” (not love focused on sex). Human passions yearn for expression and embodiment. That is the fecundity of Eros. Spirit Circles offer the venue that nurtures Eros. The circles will become energy centers of creative chaos and productive abandon. So, “Let the spirit flow!” In due time, this form of participant immersion will be developed as a complement to Soulful Circles.
- **Nonviolent Communication©** - NVC is a spiritual practice and a concrete set of skills that helps participants develop the consciousness, language and practices to maintain a perspective of empathy for oneself and others, even under trying conditions. Developed by Marshall Rosenberg, PhD, this approach to human communication opens participants to a natural state of compassion where violence or oppositional emotions are not present in the heart. NVC is simple and easy to learn. Its core elements are

“Observations, Feelings, Needs, and Requests.” But learning to be aware of these elements, and developing the skills of compassionate communication, can involve changing lifelong emotional habits. It is therefore best to gain the skills in the safe, supportive settings of regular NVC Practice Groups.

- **Relational Power (“Power-With”)** – Social, political and positional power can align with and model a relational vision and mission, and doing so will spark social transformation. A shift into relational power will take intentional commitment and time, because in most settings the transition will involve a congregation adapting to significant cultural changes in its power relations. To make this shift to truly and deeply commit to a relational vision involves entering into covenant that seeks mutual empowerment grounded in empathy. When congregations, with their lay and professional leaders, choose to become guided by relational power, they acknowledge and affirm the ability to *be* affected and to affect others by first opening to others. How this happens is by cultivating and holding relational spaces safe and openly receptive as places of trust and mutual learning.

Receptivity forms the shift, then the spaces become evocative. This practice engenders “mutual co-creation.” Participants relate in and with each other in a context of receptive presence. That context itself forms the qualities, and even sanctity, of their relational space, because it becomes like a hearth, or a womb, that gestates with potential. By feeling and being embraced and held in such a soulful setting, and then practicing deep, caring, mutual inquiry that wants and welcomes shared discernment, the circle becomes a medium for meaning-rich communion and wisdom. Silence partners this quality of presence. It holds an openness to what is not yet known, inviting discovery from the resonances evoked by the space of humans fully present each with the other.

This form of empowerment in receptive relational space is (by its very nature) not decision-based or results-oriented, although it yields results in abundance. It is inquiry-based and discovery-oriented, by

practicing collaborative and co-creative presence. Relational power enters into “heuristic process,” which is exploratory inquiry --not technical or methodical, but a mutual deepening into meaning. This differs strikingly from “power-over” politics which operates from its grounding as one-sided power. Thinking and acting oppositionally is the common understanding of power and politics in society today. In the extreme it is the ability to affect another without being affected, or to influence without being influenced. Majority rule, opposition, and the need for compromise are built into the system. This is why one-sided power leads easily to conflict and resentment. It does not include the other empathically.

Relational power differs radically by being radically receptive. With relational power we sense, acknowledge, and seek to respond well and deeply to the needs of whoever (in the congregation or elsewhere) is “the other.” Differing needs become part of the collaborative mix that emerges. Relational power is openly welcoming, nonjudgmental, and empathic in its embrace of people’s needs, gifts, struggles, and yearnings. It is Agape Love present and active. Such love becomes sustained and evoked in congregational life by a deep aesthetic and spiritual order and ethos -- feminist in its qualities of receptivity and relatedness – expressing and seeking ever to live a creative vision of love and mutual regard. Congregations that commit -- by covenant and practice --to relational power as their way of being and becoming together will embody and personify a joyful, robust, creative, transformative ministry and life in the world.

- **Congregational Gifts Assessment and Nurture** – Every congregation has its special areas of congregational strength and passion. These form the pride and power of the ministries moving forth within and out from the faith community. It is vitally important that these strengths capture the enthusiasm and support of the membership, for these are the congregation’s gifts. They need to be cultivated intentionally. That empowers the congregation.

Each congregation has gifts, as well as areas that need development. What is important is to start with the gifts and affirm the assets and strengths of the congregation. Those may include worship, religious education, social justice outreach, community service, caring for members, and financial stewardship. They may be unique strengths such as an outstanding music program, youth leadership development, community nonviolence team, lay pastoral ministry, or a worship associates team. Whatever the gifts they can become the expressive nodes of creative passion that fuel the congregation's life and mission. All else in the congregation is influenced by the energies illuminated by the congregation's gifts.

The practice of working with the gifts not only names the congregation's strengths and sources of pride. It also addresses the congregation's shadows and longings, all of which (when worked with intentionally) can eventually become congregational strengths as well. But they need to move through an intentional process of discernment and development. That move, itself, is healing for the life of the congregation. This framework for conducting congregational soul work offers an extraordinary model for tapping into the energies of congregational life, and guiding those energies into creative expression in ways that enliven the interests and passions of the members as they become engaged in their chosen ministries of the congregation. This full process is called "Congregational Visioning." At the end of this paper you will find a more complete summary description of the visioning process I follow.

- **Practices of Deep Dialogue** - Healthy congregational decisions center on the practice of effective dialogue. Through meaningful dialogue a diverse faith community can build cooperation, collaboration, and common understanding. Bring added depth and inquiry that "lives into the questions" (Rilke) and the congregation can become a community with wisdom as its sustaining ground. Inquiry leads toward depth and understanding.

Dialogue is a practice that not only enjoins individuals in probing conversation. There are levels of skill and subtleties of discernment that nominate dialogue as a genuine group spiritual practice. As congregational leaders and dedicated members grow adept with the potential available through deep dialogue, then qualities of empathic presence, creative insight, life-enhancing wisdom, and contemplative action can all resonate and contribute from within the dialogue circles. That richness is prone to become a transformative presence. One profound expression of that marriage of receptivity and creative energy can be the emergence of “Dialogue Ministries,” whose influence is so powerful that it is likely to move out beyond the walls of the faith community. The participatory practices of deep dialogue may, over time and with intention, become a reverential form of congregational ritual: a cultural cornerstone of beloved community. I am currently developing this mode of group inquiry.

- **Creating and Holding Receptive Space** – This practice focuses more directly on skills and qualities that were first mentioned above in terms of relational power. Here they pertain directly on developing leader skills. There is an art to facilitating group conversations. Likewise there’s an art to maintaining a receptive setting. The skills especially involve creating and maintaining qualities of relational space that can move the dialogue to depths of discernment and discovery. Such skills are especially needed because people naturally gravitate toward free-form discussion where they express diverse opinions in ways that become oppositional and argumentative, or that fail to acknowledge or build upon what other speakers have offered. A trained facilitator can bring a sense of fairness and equanimity to the conversation. Being inclusive, the facilitator can bring out the quiet participants. By asking open-ended questions, the facilitator can expand the conversation. By pacing the conversation, the facilitator can honor not just what ideas are being explored, but also cultivate a calming presence in which the thinking can grow richer and more subtle. Tempering the pace of dialogue can deepen the quality of the conversation and invite a sense of

reverence that evokes soulful feelings, bringing out unexpressed longings and underlying meaning.

Receptive space is sacred space, whether the conversation is taking place in a board meeting, a congregational meeting, or a committee or small group session. By creating and holding receptive space everyone present is included and feels safe and unguarded. Every thought is given a chance to be fully and caringly heard. Silence can become a participant, welcoming wisdom into the space. A sense may emerge that the conversation is open for the presence of mystery and intuition, an invitation to inspiration. For the relational life of the congregation, there is much to be gained from leader-facilitators who have become savvy to the ways of creating and holding receptive space.

- **Discerning and Learning by Noticing Effects** – We notice effects by feeling them in our bodies. Some sensation quickens our imaginings and we say, “Aha! I feel something stirring in this faith community.” Congregation leaders can pay heed to felt effects by asking the question, “Are members attracted, inspired, enthused, and energized, or are they repulsed, upset, fearful, angry, or troubled?” The truth in congregations is that “emotions rule,” whether we like it or not. They will make or break a ministry or a program. They can divide a church. When the mood starts to “go south,” leaders had better be on alert. On the other hand, when the mood is especially good, and something is going quite well, it needs to be acknowledged and encouraged. Leaders need to stay keenly aware of the feeling ground – good or ill -- of their congregation’s life. The practice of noticing effects is a qualitative tool essential to the leader’s repertoire.

This kind of awareness is a subtle, intuitive-feeling skill that only gets honed through experience and attention. To sense the demeanor of a congregation’s feeling life is notably different from setting goals for solving problems. It takes disciplined training to attune one’s perceptions. This skill may best be thought of as a “distant early warning sign” that is just showing up in relations and conversations.

Nonetheless, monitoring and noticing effects is still only a first step in detecting a need to be addressed by congregational leaders. The next step is *not* to move into strategy, but to *move deeper* into discernment to determine the probable influence of that effect, sensing its underlying causes and generative gestures. A guiding question would be, “What might this effect be saying about the health of some aspect of the congregational life?” Without a doubt, this intuitive-feeling skill will partner well with analytical data (e.g., pledge income and attendance records) for determining the health factors and momentum of congregational life. By noticing effects we are attuning to the soul of the congregation.

- **Love as the Spiritual Ground of Faith and Congregations** - There is a profound wisdom that embraces life; a wisdom imbued by the presence of love. That wisdom does not tell us that life will be easy or painless. The lessons for living with the guidance of wisdom come hard, yet they find their ground in the deep truths of the human heart. This guidance is not obscure or narrowly based. It dwells in all faiths, and it dwells at the center of all wise congregations. It is the underlying and overarching wisdom of love.

The Tao of Life is the Tao of Love. There is no greater wisdom teaching by which to live. The ancient Greeks spoke of love in terms of Agape, Eros, and Philia, depicting love’s co-creative mutuality. Agape is unconditional acceptance and inclusion: a gift to all people regardless. Eros, broadly understood, is the Creative Energy of Life that seeks expression and communion through life. Philia is the embodiment of that vital bond. It is the fluid abundance of life with life that we experience as friendship, fellowship, and community. A healthy, vigorous, creative, and engaged congregation lives in, and remains mindful of, the wisdom and dance of love as its primary source of sustenance.

The language of Agape, Eros, and Philia can be expressed poetically as Hearth, Hope, and Hands. In this way love can be imagined as the very life of a faith community. Hearth expresses the warm open

welcome into home. Hearth is grounded in silence and openness. It is hospitality writ wide and deep. Everyone is wanted, accepted, safe, and included in high regard and with no judgment. That welcome is offered through love and selfless service. Hope arises in the heart within the presence of hearth's freedom. But hope arises slowly. It arises only with its siblings: faith and courage. It takes courage to become vulnerable and bear one's pain to others. It takes trust and faith that doing so can lead to continued acceptance and healing, and maybe even growth.

Hope comes when soul's passionate longings are welcomed, greeted caringly and with support. Then pain and suffering may begin to move toward unexplored potential and possibility, and one's inner gifts can awaken into awareness. In contemplation, and in shared relations, when gifts readily gain the grace of insight and imagination, sparks fly, and zest comes. You can count on it. When this occurs in caring community, hope shines and summons; and fierce and fiery longings rush for release in compelling, creative forms. The hands of community meet this energy as *Philia* incarnate. The Spirit of Life becomes the blessing that, through fellowship and action, form beloved community. Hearth, hope, and hands partner in a dance as love manifest in the midst of congregational life.

- **The Congregation's "Wisdom Bible"** – Imagine a worship committee teaming up with the minister and staff of the congregation to create their unique version of a "Wisdom Bible." Other members would surely join such a project. That compilation would hold the treasured expressions of wisdom, guidance, devotional sources, and healing comfort compiled as a congregational resource. Its many uses would alone justify the project, but also imagine the conversations this project could spawn. The spiritual and ethical personality of the congregation would find special expression and focus. In fact, the very act of compiling such a loose-leaf, always-growing "Wisdom Bible" would, itself, be a deepening process involving all age groups in the congregation. The fruits of this project

would touch the entire faith community, including those who are home-bound. With this as a practice, the congregation would have its own unique resource of wisdom teachings as a common set of readings, quotations, stories, liturgies, prayers, meditations, and poems for many purposes and applications in their congregational life.

- **Rituals, Ceremonies, and Liturgies of the Religious Community –** Whether the professional staff and the devoted leaders of the congregation are conducting Sunday morning worship, facilitating a small group session, leading a monthly meeting, or are out in the larger community standing in prophetic witness there is need for ritual. Current in most UU congregations is the practice of beginning and closing times of the gathered community with a chalice lighting and an appropriate reading. In most UU settings, this is a good and honored practice of “framing” the session liturgically. Yet we can do better, and that is why this practice is being lifted up

Though Unitarian Universalism is not a liturgical tradition, it is important that we treasure and cultivate the feeling life by conjuring an aesthetic ambience that invites silence and soulful presence. Most meetings need this kind of liminal reminder that the “Something More” can join those gathered and center them in a context that invites wisdom into the circle. There may also be times within meetings or other gatherings that the circle would benefit from a period of contemplative presence and deep discernment, welcoming wisdom and love into the midst. This need is, therefore, added as a practice that would enhance the feeling life of the congregation. To open to such liturgical gifts would enhance the role of music, silence, litanies, and meditations into the soul life of UU congregations. It would also welcome the talents of creative UU liturgists throughout our movement.

Progressive Liturgy: An Exemplary Prayer*

This prayer comes from a spiritual grounding that is not theistic, pantheistic, Taoist, Buddhist, or Wiccan. It comes, instead, from life itself: the sacred wisdom of full participation in and with life. Developing a “Liturgy of Life” is what the work of creating a “Wisdom Bible” is all about.

I offer this prayer as a mood-setting liturgical entre to the waters of life. Please read slowly. Let the resonances of silence echo in your soul and access what they will that responds with your heart.

"Beloved Life, within You and with You I find my being and becoming - to live, to learn, and to love. You are 'I AM,' and I come to my True Self within Your Presence. In humble gratitude I kneel empty and open as we commune in Silence...; and I receive.

"Beloved Life, within You and with You I seek Your stirrings from my soul-body as I attend to the currents alerting my heart to fierce and fiery truths. May I welcome them, and center into the urgings of Your Spirit. May I unfold with creative faithfulness, following Your promptings with courage.

"Beloved Life, within You and with you, as we partner in and as this dance of Soul-Spirit Presence in our earth community, may all relations draw ever toward mutual healing and love, and by those actions bring hope. May I, in prayer and practice, be an emissary of Your service and wisdom.

Blessed be You, the Realm of Beloved Presence, for You faithfully guide the human heart.

Aho, Salaam, Shalom, Namaste, Namu Myoho Ringe Kyo; Amen.

May we stewards of earth community remember forgotten truths of ancient wisdom, still alive in the hearts of many, and learn anew the path of full participation, newly aligned in awareness and the practices of natural communion with all our relations. *Note:This prayer is in the public domain.

Congregational Visioning and Planning: An Exemplary Scenario

The question will arise, “How might these relational practices come into form in the normative life congregational leadership?” One good example – one that I am currently exploring in proposals with two congregations – is to integrate these relational practices into a typical congregational program. An opportune moment is through the periodic strategic planning process. That becomes a time when a planning committee can embrace the option to supplement strategic thinking with relational thinking and practices. Visioning and planning bring together the relational and policy aspects of congregational growth. Relational planning is easily neglected due to the practical and tangible concerns of congregational needs. This parallel approach offered here addresses both dimensions of guiding growth. It operates best by having two collaborative teams – a strategic and a vision team – working in parallel. Below you will see how I highlight the congregation’s relational needs and vision. Strategic work is well known.

This scenario is being offered currently to two congregations with which I am working. Here below I illustrate that scenario in summary as a “Visioning Process.” The primary elements are these:

Phase I - “Exploring the Congregation’s Gifts.” This workshop (open to all members and youth) explores and identifies the congregation’s strengths, yearnings, passions, and creative potential for why they come, what they care about, what they are proud of, and how they feel engaged as progressive people of faith in a worshipping community. Besides naming the congregation’s many gifts, the take-away from this session involves a renewal of energy, bolstering the several forms of ministry that are currently shaping the qualities, character, and mission of the congregation. This gifts session becomes a catalyst for renewing their vitality and focusing their momentum.

Phase II - “Discerning the Depths.” This session is held intentionally with the elected and appointed leaders (e.g., committee chairs) of the congregation to explore sensitive and systemic issues and concerns. It takes a focused and reflective look at the congregation’s shadow side of resistance, pain, struggles, and areas of avoidance. By its very nature, this can become an opportunity for healing, or initiating healing, for the

congregation. This session may best be characterized as “intentional soul work” that goes deep. It will foster feelings of compassionate presence and nonjudgmental, yet honest and truth-seeking, inquiry into the emotional ground of the congregation. Poetic liturgical practices will help foster communion with wisdom’s guidance throughout this session. Outcomes from this thoughtful gathering will move the visioning process to depths typically untapped and unaddressed by traditional approaches to congregational visioning, approaches that settle for a “vision statement.” The wisdom gained from this session will flow into and influence the emerging, evolving vision for the congregation.

Phase III – “Visioning Charette* Weekend: Bringing It All Together.”

This weekend event is a Friday evening, Saturday morning, and Sunday morning series of programs involving the entire congregation (including children and youth in phases). The goal is to imagine the congregation’s future. It will become a workshop-playshop that brings together the hopes, the gifts, the discerned wisdom, and the forward momentum of the congregation. It all culminates in a grand vision that is celebrated inter-generationally in a Sunday service. Using graphics, vignettes, verbal documentation, program plans, and reasoned strategies, this fun and intensive weekend offers glimpses of the possible and hope-filled congregation in its mission, its vitality, and its outreach ministries. The Sunday service will share and celebrate this vision in worship and song.

(*Note: The word “charette” refers to a design intensive, and comes from the French Beaux Arts tradition.)

Phase IV - “The Congregational Plan”- The documentation and implementation strategies for the congregational vision finally need to come together thoughtfully in a product and a clear process. This is where the Strategic Planning Team’s practical and tangible recommendations merge with the Visioning Team’s relational vision (of gifts, discernment, and participatory process) to form the Preliminary Plan. After one further congregational feedback session, the Comprehensive Congregational Plan is brought before the congregation in an annual meeting. The final version, when adopted, will serve to guide policy, program, and capital decisions for plan implementation, **and** to cultivate relational practices of “leading from within,” offering a soulful approach to “building the beloved community.”

Covenant of Relational Practices*

© Rev. Roy Reynolds

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The universal spiritual impulse seeks the communion of all people. With heartfelt yearning, we gather from our separateness as individuals to cultivate religious community. Our commitment to this high calling asks each of us to engage in shared practices that grow community. Is this your desire?

So it is.

The story of progressive faith affirms freedom, love, and justice grounded in the wisdom and truths of a life sustained in love.

I choose to dedicate myself to building the beloved community

Worship is the spiritual heart and soul of our congregation, centering and summoning the gathered community into a life of vision and commitment.

I choose to regularly celebrate worship in this, my religious home.

Many areas of congregational strength and passion form the ministries and mission of our faith community.

I choose to support and cultivate the many gifts of our congregation.

We touch soul and awaken spirit through experiences of liturgy and music, and in the arts and stories that tap into the depths of wisdom.

Through sacred stories and the lens of the arts, I choose to deepen myself in the wisdom of progressive faith.

Growing our mind with greater understanding opens the heart to profound truths from human journey. Ours is a learning congregation in which people and community grow in capacity, in reach, and depth.

I choose to continue learning beyond my opinions, and to grow with this learning community.

In congregational life, we are encouraged to take our roles, but not ourselves, seriously. Joyful community thrives on camaraderie, shared interests, and abundant opportunities to have fun.

I choose joy!

As we surf our congregation's waters, doing and being form a dance of balance. Soul is sustained in this dance by seeing beyond surface appearances, and sensing the needs and inner vitality of things.

I choose to see with the eyes of the soul.

Heeding the call of social justice and right relations, we witness to the guidance of wisdom. Wise action is the fruit of a fertile faith.

I choose to stay engaged with society through service and compassionate action.

The unfolding vision of our congregation answers the question, "What calls our congregation forward?" Outreach ministry answers the question, "What lasting effects do we choose to create together?"

In community, we choose to envision hope, support our shared ministries, and act with compassion.

Creating space to "hear each other into speech" is the primary act of building community. Only then can we achieve mutual understanding. Only then do we experience communion.

I choose to participate often in the practices of deep dialogue.

Building trust, respect, and mutual empowerment in community takes explicit commitment. Crafting statements of shared expectations, values, and promises forms a foundation for authentic community.

I choose to be and stay in covenant with each and every member of our congregation.

A caring congregation nurtures individuals with loving support, provides a welcoming home to newcomers, and expects members to bring their gifts of talent, energy, and financial support.

With my heart and my financial abilities, I choose to express my care and commitment to our congregation.

With our sincere and continued vigilance to honor these practices, together we cultivate and strengthen our congregation as a healthy, creative, and compassionate religious home.

May this be so. Blessed be. Amen.

*Note: This is a first draft, very likely to be revised.