

# Member Vision Essays:

## Stimulating Ideas for New Opportunities at the United Church of Christ of Vermillion

These pages represent a collection of essays written by our members and friends presenting ideas, hopes and dreams about our future as a church family. They are presented anonymously so we can focus on ideas rather than personalities. Our hope is that these ideas will stimulate your thinking for our work here in Vermillion!

Here is the invitation we provided this summer:

We invite members and friends to re-imagine the Vermillion UCC by writing an essay. (We suggest a length of 500 words.) Often we rethink institutions when there is a crisis. There is no crisis in our church. In contrast, we have an abundance of good spirit and energy, talent and resources, facilities and land. It is because of this abundance that we ask for your considered opinion about the mission of our church. As you think about our future, you might conclude that the current mission (however you describe it) needs no changing. You might also argue for a completely new vision for our church family. It is up to you. As you write, please do try to define what you perceive as the mission of the UCC and how you think that mission can best be served. Feel free to express your vision for the overall mission of the Vermillion UCC or for a specific program. Feel free, as well, to address things we are already doing but could do better, things we should start doing, or things we should stop doing. It is our hope that this process will provide a means to share our hopes with each other and to clarify our spiritual mission.

## Essay 1

As a life-long member of the UCC, I've been involved in the life of the Church for many, many years. We have evolved over the years in programming depending on the strengths of our various pastors.

I feel our greatest strength is and has been our musical team with our organist, our choirs and of course, the children with their marvelous musical talent. We have a variety of music with very talented musicians along with contributions from USD faculty, staff and students. How fortunate we are!! We also have an excellent LAF program on Wednesday afternoon with many participants who don't regularly attend Church.

I have thought a great deal about what we can do as a Church family to become more community oriented, not just in developing programming for our members and friends who attend regularly or on Wednesdays but for the community as a whole. The Boy Scouts and Head Start have been around a long time, and we have had several religious groups utilize our Church space on occasion. These groups aren't really open to the community or to us unless we fit into one of those boxes.

One of the things that we could do is to begin a program of community outreach. We have started this with our garden space west of the Church. Perhaps at some point in the future, we'll have enough funds available to build a community center or outreach center on that lot for all kinds of activities, but at the present time we can utilize the space that we have available in our Church.

Some of the areas in which we might get involved include babysitting classes for boys and girls, CPR classes, exercise classes like Tai Chi or Yoga that aren't offered at the Wellness Center, a book club or book exchange, a flower or bulb exchange or giveaway, classes on preparing for retirement and understanding Medicare/Social Security, community religious classes, bereavement assistance classes, a nurse visiting program along with our prayer team that regularly visits the homebound, a blood drive, conversations about the differences among all of us (gay, lesbian, old, young and all those in between) and just about anything else we can think of. Thinking really big, what about morning breakfast for those who need a meal to begin the day or a day care or pre-school? If we can think of it, we can try it.

Some of these ideas will work, others won't, however, people in the community will associate our Church as being a hub of activity. Our Church should never be idle from morning till late at night.

Will this mean we'll have to hire a program director? Perhaps some time in the future, our programs will be so popular that we'll have to take that step. For now, we can start slowly adding a program or two each year utilizing the volunteer expertise of our members and friends. The Lutherans do this well, and there isn't any reason why we can't think of things that they aren't doing.

Our Church is a hub of activity on Wednesdays and Sundays. What about the rest of the week? That is 5 days where it is relatively quiet. It shouldn't be, and it will be up to all of us to make sure it isn't.

## Essay 2

Honestly, I have been putting off writing this essay. I think I got hung up on the word “essay,” because my thoughts about this wonderful family of faith just aren’t as organized as that word implies. So I’m not writing an essay. I’m putting down my somewhat random thoughts. And just in case my word count begins to get out of control, let me just list the most important ones right here at the beginning:

Love	Thinking
Safety	Inclusiveness
Family	Innovation
Service	Youth
Music	Bridging

We do a pretty good job of providing love, safety, family, service, and music – I do not expect those priorities to change much, even if the specifics do. We are trying to provide opportunities (safe and loving ones!) for people of all ages to think and talk about their faith and their beliefs – we need to do even more of that.

I would like to see us move beyond those fairly comfortable areas and start finding ways to connect to people and ideas with which we are less comfortable. Compared to most “mainstream” churches, we can claim to be inclusive, but we could do so much more. We say that our LGBT brothers and sisters are welcome, but I don’t think we are doing enough to support them, especially the middle/high school and college students who are under siege from other “Christians.” While we are fortunate enough to have a relationship with the Native American community, I would like to see that bond strengthened. Many of our Native American students, along with others, struggle with issues of school and family – surely a congregation with our resources can find ways to support and encourage them. Likewise with our friends from SESDAC.

Finally, we need to find and use all possible ways to push back against those who use religion as a device to divide and condemn. We should be building bridges between people who follow the way of Jesus and people of other faith traditions who wish to create a better world. I don’t know what that might look like, but I know it’s something I would like to be a part of.

### Essay 3

Education should be a focus of our church. We should educate ourselves, educate the children of our community, and support the educational institutions in Vermillion. There is a strong interest among our members and friends in education, including those for whom it is their vocation, and this provides a strong foundation for the church to emphasize education.

Education has been one of the historic emphases of our denomination. Congregationalists started some of the greatest colleges in our nation. Throughout its history, many of the members of our church have been teachers and administrators in the University of South Dakota and the Vermillion School District.

Educating ourselves. We currently have a vibrant program of education for our children, Loaves and Fishes (LAF). We should continue to support LAF, which not only serves our children well but also draws young families to the church. We also have engaged confirmation classes. We should emphasize our existing educational opportunities for adults and expand these to meet the interests of members and friends.

Another church with which I am familiar sponsors what is called Communiversity during the middle of winter. This involves several courses, each of which meets 1-2 hours each Sunday afternoon for four weeks. Some of the courses are taught by University faculty members. Some are related to lectures or other events occurring in the community during the month. This is just one example of a new educational program we could establish.

Educating the children of our community. There are many elementary-age children in our community who need tutoring in order to succeed in school and ultimately in life. Many of these children may have parents who are unable to provide educational support at home. Other churches have taken the lead in attempting to respond to hunger in our community. We support these efforts and should continue to do so, but we also could become the leaders in responding to the educational needs of the children of our community.

There are many successful models for tutoring programs. With relatively little study, we would be able to find a model that would work here. I have spoken with one person who directed a successful tutoring program for a church in a major urban area. She offered to help us start a program, but she also pointed out that there are experts in the USD School of Education, for example, in teaching reading, who could assist us.

Concerns are sometimes raised about the potential liability for misconduct by a tutor. This is, of course, a legitimate concern for any program that involves children. But the concern can be and is successfully addressed by existing programs. This should not be an impediment. One solution, for example, is to include parents in the tutoring sessions, which may have the added benefit of helping the parent support the child's education.

Supporting our community's educational institutions. For economic and other reasons, the University of South Dakota and the Vermillion School District face serious challenges. These institutions and our members and friends who work for them need support. Our church could become a place for educators to discuss their work and for other interested persons to discuss positive ways to improve these institutions and support these educators.

Staffing. Development and operation of existing and new educational programs will require increased staffing. While volunteer staffing could be explored, it is likely that significant success will require staffing by at least a paid, half-time position.

#### Essay 4

The future should first of all use the good from past and present.

Our building is beautiful, strong and an imposing structure in the community, let's keep it up. Perhaps the wider community could use it more – academic, social, special interest groups could avail themselves of our facilities – for a fee and this would also help with up keep. We do ok, but maybe other opportunities are out there.

Vital to the thriving of our church community is its programs for children and youth. Keep up the good work!! The LAF program seems to be working. However, many children attend this and the summer bible school program whose families are not a part of our congregation in any way. Is it possible that we can keep these youngsters yet charge a fee for participation or maybe even some kind of inkind service to the parents to help defray the expense of this program. The same could apply to the older kids in the Confirmation programs.

The old “Women’s Fellowship” is a thing of the past – what can we do to get more women involved ?

Interest based related groups, service projects, social events, helping opportunities, educational events could pull in women for whom these groups would be of interest. I think two women’s events a year for ALL women of the church, perhaps a luncheon and speaker dealing with a topic of interest, an evening out with a meal , (food still tops the list!!) at a local restaurant- child care available so the moms can get to know all of the others and develop new friendships.

Keep the congregation up to date on the programs of the Wider church. The multitude of programs can provide opportunities for participation if people are aware of what is going on. I think maybe we tend to dwell on the at home and forget we are part of a wonderful worldwide network of which we should be proud. Mission has many definitions. Don’t just hand out written material but verbal, brief, descriptions of what is available. This also applies to the district, state/region as well as national. We are quite a group , accomplishing great things and maybe need to blow our own horns a bit more.

A lot of emphasis is on the children, youth and their programs. There is also a sizeable group of “seniors”. Most of us are active in existing programs, but maybe there is more that could be provided for us. The Spring trip was a great example and enjoyed by everyone. More things like that. Also help in the home, rides to doctor appointments, etc are being done, but does everyone who may need the service know about it and how to take advantage of it. How about a yoga class for seniors?

The music team needs a big pat on the back! They do a great job of providing a variety of wonderful musical experiences – keep it up and keep coming up with new ideas. Music events open to the public as we have the piano and organ to showcase what we have.

The Maundy Thursday service, the Easter vigil, the Christmas Eve service, special choir events, vacation bible school, to name a few, are great; keep going and try to get more involved in some of them.

The prayer team . Here again it is always “the same people”, how can we encourage others to share in this experience. I almost hesitate but maybe there should be a “term”, more than one could be served, but new folks would be recruited on an ongoing basis. The visitation program is going strong and meeting the need in the community, but how many folks are really aware of its workings?

I wouldn't, at the present, change much in the Sunday morning services as we already have a variety of events that take place and that is good . A couple years ago we learned that “we” could take care of ourselves IF we had to – I for one liked this period of time to be ministered to by our pastoral staff, musicians and others taking part in a specific service.

#### Essay 4 continued

What about host families for USD students, a home/family away from home. Maybe this is something from the past that might be looked at again.

This really isn't an essay but just a jumble of thoughts that came as I sat down at the computer just before the deadline tomorrow. Hope maybe there are a couple things that are useful.

#### Essay 5

I've been slow in writing anything that might indicate my vision for Vermillion United Church of Christ because I wasn't sure that my voice should be heard in this endeavor. The more time that has passed the more I feel a need to share three specific ideas that I would like to have considered as a part of discussions for the future of our church.

Ardell Hatch, bless his heart, was an advocate for a pastor's reserved parking area soon after I began my call in Vermillion. I drove from Wakonda on Sunday mornings to participate in worship with usually only ten minutes to spare and there would be no place to park. This is now my only call so I no longer need a reserved space but I am convinced there should be signage for reserved parking areas for members and visitors who are handicapped or have limited mobility. A number of our people are really unable to walk extra distance when the parking lot is full. The current paved space on the west side of the church could be marked for handicapped and the gravel parking of the lot adjacent to the paved space could be for limited mobility (and maybe a couple of spots for the pastors on the far end??).

My second idea might require upgrading of our computer system, though I am no expert in this matter. We consider ourselves to be a progressive and creative church, which I believe is true. It may be time to look at becoming progressive and creative with our newsletter, the "Bell." It was a definite step in a technology direction when it became possible to send our newsletter to all who could receive it via our web server. The next step might well be to change its format and look. Adding some color – background and/or font, maybe a photo or two, and definitely altering its overall design would make it more likely to catch the eye of our hoped-for audience. When was the last time the "Bell" had a makeover?

And finally, I think the Vermillion UCC, along with the Yankton UCC, is well-positioned and a viable resource in the life of the S.D. Conference to be at the cutting edge of a new model of ministry. A program called "Conference Deacons" was developed by a Conference Task Force two years ago in an effort to provide a pastoral presence between sister congregations at important, transitional and critical times in their lives. Local church pastors and lay people would be prepared through a training process. There are too many details to be shared in this brief writing but let me say that Steve and I are excited at this possibility. As conversations continue between the S.D. and Northern Plains Conferences in regards to sharing a Conference Executive, it is becoming clear that the churches will need to offer care to one another much like that of the early church.

## Essay 6

When I consider what we are now doing corporately and individually in following the way of Jesus Christ, the commitment of those willing to step up to the plate and serve is impressive indeed. Our life draws on the creativity and care of many. There is much to protect and conserve in our current church life.

As Paul tells us, we have been created “in Christ Jesus” for doing good things. Some will respond with a stronger focus on keeping the home base strong while others will be more outward looking. There will never be a shortage of good things to do. So the question is “What good things shall we put our shoulders to?” We need to be careful about burnout.

In his parting commission, Jesus said, “first Jerusalem.” Stealing somewhat away from the context, I think that we must say (in parallel with a proper self care by the individual) that we need to be sure to care for those already within our fellowship as a first priority. How can we ask for others when we don’t take care of those already with us? Jesus did not stop with Jerusalem, so I am not suggesting we should become an inward looking church. We must not.

Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” Learning to love well is a lifelong task for all of us. In following the second of the great commandments, we struggle to balance a proper care of self with care for others. It is not a task we can pursue alone. It takes dialog with those we trust.

I have always believed strongly in the power of small fellowship groups, normally no more in size than a dozen and often somewhat smaller. They allow people to be open about their doubts, questions and challenges. Then spiritual growth is fostered, commitment to the way of Jesus is deepened, and the local church can do more. Several such groups already exist within the church. The Prayer group is a very special one. The UCC Babes is another. Barry and Mary’s Sunday morning discussion is one that some are afraid to join (I think because of misperception), but it would be good if a “Bible for Idiots” group could become a permanent feature. Pastor Steve fosters dialog and friendship well in small groups and the somewhat larger Mayflower Mondays and Salon. Pastor Elaine’s role with the care ministry and those who work with her and Marj provide one of the clearer examples of Christian love.

With the new property, more space for parking and playground equipment for our children are often mentioned. Perhaps Vicki and Cindy’s gardening efforts can lead to something longer term. We need to be alert to other opportunities for joint service and fellowship as gifting and interest surface.

## Essay 7

In a university town it might be strange to posit that the most needed ministry concerns education. That is what I will propose. In many ways, UCC already has in place many of the components of what I consider unmet educational needs in the community. These just need to be augmented and organized in a more comprehensive and appealing way.

Celebration of cultural and religious diversity are an integral part of the UCC mission, Especially the confirmation program provides a model from which to expand this part of our ministry. The Taize' and other university outreach promote student involvement and some of the more contemplative religious practices. Steve also teaches courses in religion and theology that challenge and expand the student's religious ideas and convictions. And, we have the recent back to Eden project in which we will grow and improve both real edible produce and the knowledge and love of gardening.

Now, here is what is lacking in the relationship of UCC with the greater community and the university community. In Vermillion, the places where university students can comfortably congregate, discuss, enjoy coffee, healthy food, and stimulating philosophical conversation, are rare if not absent. A place to mingle with all ages and diverse cultures is also lacking. International students and their spouses often complain that while they live in the middle of an English speaking nation, and attend classes taught in English, they have little opportunity to converse in English regularly. USD offers an ESL program that is unaffordable to many, Job Link offers 2-4 hours a week of ESL classes, free, and some church organizations offer free learning activities, most of which are strongly focused on gaining converts. I volunteer some quarter to half of my work week to tutoring and conversation with international students and the demand for my time always far exceeds the time I can offer.

Because international students are removed from their family, home, and culture, adjusting to life in America is often quite difficult. For this reason, welcoming them, offering to be a language partner, and helping them experience things in the local community is of great value to them. Not only is this a great way to help an international student feel more at-home in America, but it is an opportunity to experience and learn about other cultures. This is likely to be a life-changing experience for the host as well. This ministry extends far beyond students in Vermillion and individual gains. I am convinced that this kind of personal relationship between individuals of diverse nations and cultures is germane to building lasting world peace. In conversation with these international students, part of what we share, what we learn, is about their language, their culture, their religion. In a world that grows smaller at warp speed, this is an essential part of education, one that is not adequately addressed in our vocationally focused university education. Most importantly, we also build genuine friendships, learn to love each other.

Most of the international students come from small cities of 1 to 2 million people. Many of them have never seen a wild animal, planted a garden, walked in the woods, and rarely see a blue sky. They hunger for exposure to and knowledge about these. While many American students come from the surrounding rural communities, many of them have not grown a garden and even fewer of them have a broad understanding of environmentally sustainable practices, gardening, and good nutrition. The need for this knowledge is unquestionable. All of Vermillion, students and non-students can benefit from expanded understanding of other cultures, especially concerning sustainable living, politics, language, philosophy, and religion.

## Essay 7 continued

Our ministry should be to provide this educational service to our own and to the growing international community in Vermillion. We need a space that reserves full time a place for personal meditation and contemplation, a relaxed atmosphere for young and old adults to connect and enjoy good coffee, juice, and healthy snacks. A place to hang out. This should be a place where one expects to meet and converse with people of all ethnicities and isms, to listen to speakers, pastors, or professors talk about theology, philosophy, political issues, environmental concerns, practical life skills, and sustainable living practices. This should be a center where people find or can link to social, educational, cultural, and physical activities where health and wellness in mind, body, and spirit are promoted through seminars and guest speakers. The entire package should include community gardens to be used for youth development, as well as training in practical gardening and nutrition.

St. Cloud, MN is also a university town. The university is much larger than USD and there is a large population of Somalian refugees. What follows is the mission and vision statement of the **Central Minnesota Sustainability Project** which is a community service program developed to meet some of their needs.

### **Mission and Vision**

We have a vision of *every* central Minnesota household utilizing local, sustainably grown or ethically-produced food, goods and services.

Our mission is to facilitate local, sustainable food production and markets for a diverse Central Minnesota.

CMSP embraces an intergenerational and cross-cultural model at all times to gain strength and insight from the diversity of communities we serve.

We achieve our mission by helping people find their way back to gardens, nature and a sense of community.

For the Vermillion UCC, the gardening aspect might be smaller at first and the other needs of the university and international community be emphasized according to perceived need. Any such project must initially use available resources and attempt to address the most pressing need. In time, this kind of comprehensive community service and broadened education that transcends diversity, magnifies cross cultural similarities, and celebrates our differences will surely help UCC to expand its progressive mission to meet the needs of Vermillion and our shrinking planet.

## Essay 8

It is pretty simplistic and summed up in one word – love; love that is evidenced in the way we support and respond to the needs of our faith community and our wider community and world.

At this point in time, I believe our youth programs are the most important thing we do and I prefer that it continues to be our focus. Listening to young people stand in front of the congregation and talk about feeling safe, wanting to be here, and having the opportunity to explore their beliefs speaks volumes. Our young people are our future. Providing a space and opportunity for them to learn how to relate to others in a caring and peaceful way is, in my opinion, critical if we want to change the divisiveness in our world.

I wonder if it would be possible to expand that focus to include all generations. A question Pastor Elaine raised in her sermon on April 3 relative to the need for Christian faith to change has stayed with me. She encouraged us to ponder what would happen if there was a Center for Interfaith Dialogue. Are we poised to undertake such a development?

Whatever vision we pursue, I believe it is important to recognize that visions will change based on events in our community and wider world and based on the talents of our leadership.

## Essay 9

When I started intentionally listening for direction, the first thing that came to mind was that the people were most important. That is fairly obvious, but I believe that most of the suggestions I have to offer (several of which have been offered at times in the past) would enhance people's experience of worship and community.

In terms of the physical facility, I foresee more appropriate spaces for classes, small groups and committee meetings; one of these spaces could be combined with a library that actually gets used, with comfortable chairs for browsing. These spaces need to be easily accessible and inviting.

Another dream is to have a small chapel which could be connected to the main building with a hallway. This would be open for prayer, small weddings and baptisms, and more intimate services such as Taize or Evensong.

A larger outdoor play area for children seems a necessity.

In terms of staffing, I think the ministry of our full-time senior pastor and part-time assistant pastor is working well right now with our current membership. On top of whatever assistance I am able to provide, a part-time parish nurse would be a welcome addition to our caring ministry.

I would like to see us make a greater effort to encourage continued participation in the church by our young people after they are confirmed. They could be asked to provide special music (perhaps starting a vocal/instrumental group of their own) or to be lay readers or participate in skits. With so many of our church family involved in theatre, it seems to me that these talents could be tapped in worship. Liturgical dance is another avenue to explore.

Conservatives often characterize liberal, mainline churches as dispensing a watered-down, "feel-good" Gospel. Not here! I appreciate that we are often challenged to become less bound to our individualistic, materialistic culture and to become more Christlike in our perceptions and actions.

Essay 10

Teach and Learn

Celebrate and Support -----

Faith -----

Community Outreach

Worship

Town

Community

University

Personal

Nation

Word

World

Sacraments

Music

Our church family begins with faith at its core. We worship but it may take numerous forms and the space must accommodate that.

As a family we support each other and celebrate with each other.

We teach and learn.

We reach out to others far and near.

A space must accommodate all these. While we look to the future we must understand our history.

## Essay 11

The mission of UCC is twofold: creating a welcoming community while also helping people to grow. We're very good at the first part: creating community through familiar rituals and routines in a welcoming place, a place to watch children grow and people go through life's ups and downs. I feel comfortable here because no one is pushing me into programs and activities and specific religious beliefs. I appreciate all the wonderful things that UCC does for the larger community of Vermillion, which is also part of the vision of UCC-as-community. Sometimes the array of opportunities or activities one can join is almost dizzying! The community is welcoming and encouraging without being pushy and intrusive.

But the church is more than just a comfortable place; it must also be a place that challenges us and makes us grow spiritually, intellectually, and socially. Sometimes the church feels too comfortable, too complacent. Perhaps we should be encouraged (or even required) to mix things up sometimes, to sit in a different pew, to meet new people, to do things a different way. We're pretty comfortable here—but that might also mean we're not growing. I recognize that we already do some avantgarde things, like printing personal statements from confirmation candidates that don't reflect creed, singing Buddhist songs, or serving graham crackers for communion. What more can we do? How do we maintain this balance between comfort/familiarity and change/challenge? How can we help people to grow in new ways? Would the congregation revolt if too much change is required? It's a hard balance to maintain, but perhaps we should envision a future where the mission of change and challenge is equal to the mission of comfortable community.

A final thought is that the church's mission should also be to provide a physical place **as a sanctuary or a haven from everyday life**. Having grown up Catholic, I'm used to a sanctuary that is, well, a sanctuary, a holy place where people don't talk and chatter. On one hand I like the openness of UCC using our sanctuary for all kinds of activities, but it doesn't inspire that kind of awe of a **sacred space** used only for prayer, music, and contemplation. Plus, the church doesn't seem to be open and available for dropping by unobtrusively. Perhaps we could build a very small place—even just outdoors, where people can sit and pray contemplatively and privately. This place should be available when people need it, whether it be an early Wednesday morning, a Friday lunch, or a cold dark night. But it must also be a sacred place that would not be violated by other uses.

## Essay 12

For me, what works now about the church is that it is a place of beauty. I like the height of it and the light of it. (I always go a little nutsy when Steve talks about all the people getting married outside of the sanctuary because I think he's going to turn it into a baseball diamond. ) It's been a place of calm for me in times of sorrow, in enjoying music and for celebration. I've also loved it in the mysterious dark. It's also a place of companionship. I'm not a gregarious person but I find calm and satisfaction in sitting among seekers and doers. Hurrah for the garden. It's also one of the few places when one gets beyond the swim-team stage where one can meet families. I like it that we still try to be intergenerational. It's also an inspirational place and when beauty and good people and inspiration come together it is wonderful. I am realizing that I am talking mostly about the building and perhaps about Sunday and I'll get away from that in a minute, but before I do, I think I might want to say that as boringly traditional as Sunday in church may be it is culturally a solid thing. One hopes one can find beauty, companionship and inspiration if one needs that in that place at that time.

I think we have been and continue to be a place where we encourage the arts to flourish. I remember Charlie Brown and Christmas Carol. I remember the funny conversation about Camelot. I remember special music like the Rutter folk song suite for the Welcome Table and all the wonderful solos. But I think it might be time to brainstorm new possibilities. We've never done much with the graphic arts, but I took a watercolor class once in the basement. I could see short term classes in drawing or painting or nude sketching. How about a camera class or knitting or using your computer for art. Perhaps we should sponsor a teen improv group. How about a night featuring singers doing songs from musicals in parts they'd never be cast in.

Finally, there are conversations I'd like to have. One would be on how to have a conversation. I saw a congregant who has a very different political point of view from me nodding affirmatively during Steve's baseball-gambling sermon as I was too. Yet we would have a hard time talking seriously about it, I fear. I'd like to relearn how to have conversation to understand rather than to make points. As we whirl along I'd like to have conversations about what the Christlike approach to issues of medicine and technology might be.

Again, finally, I think it might be wise to be a little more in touch with what the denomination is doing in terms of social action. I think we sometimes don't sign the declaration when we could and should. Surely, sometimes we need to enter the dialogue on social issues. Perhaps we need to take up one a year for study and for an idea on what actions could be taken. Slow but something.

### Essay 13

There is nothing more difficult than attempting to forecast the future and especially of the United Church of Christ in Vermillion whose members frequently move in and out. As a long-time member of the church, I have seen hopes fade and desires change.

However, it seems a good time to try the waters, so to speak, and think long and hard and yes, pray especially for the future. These are truly difficult times and at times like this, the church needs to be strong and as united as this diverse group can be.

I perceive the mission of the church to be that of service to those in need through the love that comes from God that we have for each other. By caring for others, we develop a bond that binds us to each other and to God. I feel that our church programs attempt to reach this goal. Each of us being human struggle from time to time with these Christian good intentions. It is also easy to think of the church in terms of a building and we do have a beautiful sturdy structure, but I also feel that too much of our resources involve bricks and mortar and endless upkeep and that sometimes hinders the fulfillment of our mission.

The way we serve may not involve a church building, but instead be based on relationships within and also outside the church membership. Knowing, understanding and helping those of different cultures and race should be a strong part of our vision. We may do this in a multiple of ways always striving to develop a better understanding of each other as we build stronger relationships based on our love and caring for others.

From these relationships needs will surface that will help direct us – such as reaching out to international students to discover what they need and want, inviting them into homes and sharing food, ideas and offering help if needed. We might work with inner city groups bringing them here to learn how to grow their vegetables on our church lot or in containers if they have no back yard at home in which to plant a garden. It might be possible to work on an Indian reservation to help them with their concerns and needs, possibly they too could learn how to grow vegetables or at least we could reach out to assist with whatever their needs might be. We have helped to develop some worthwhile programs in Vermillio, but I'm quite sure we could go beyond what we have done here.

These are some ideas that come to mind as examples and I know there is much to be done. Most of all I feel that a great deal can happen by developing our relationships within and outside the church doors.

#### Essay 14

Currently in our church, drama is a part of the youth ministry. Each December, a multi-generational church cast recreates the Christmas story, and many Easter seasons have had a youth presentation of the Passion story. These programs teach Bible stories to the participants, as well as drawing visitors to the performances.

An extension of our church ministry is Vermillion Community Theatre. Because Steve Miller and a large number of our members are involved, the summer musicals have served as an outreach tool for our church.

Offering drama opportunities to adults with professional skills could add a deeper spiritual dimension to our worship. I have had the opportunity to see adult religious drama on three occasions. The first two were Passion dramas during church worship services. In each play, actors portrayed the people around the crucifixion.

The third was a one-woman show that was performed at a national church meeting. The actor portrayed several women who were connected to the church including Peter's mother-in-law and a priest's wife at the time when Catholic priests had to become celibate.

An adult drama group could perform 30-minute dramatic productions once a semester. The group could also do shorter 5-minute skits during children's sermons or stewardship drives. A drama graduate student could be hired to direct the actors.

With the talent and interest in drama within our church, an adult drama group would be an exciting addition to our ministry.

## Essay 15

### **Question/Statement**      Why are Single Persons Excluded from the UCC?

I attend the UCC every Sunday for a while, but then become frustrated and remain home, with no one appearing to notice when I'm gone. Extra events as *LAF*, *United Congregational Women*, or fellowship dinners all assure everyone's *welcome* – but not *acceptance*.

Attending any such offering would instantly transform me into the odd aunt always in the way; for example, being childless is rather unhelpful to LAF, women's group attendees are presumably stay-at-home moms or retirees as meetings are during morning working hours, and my personal situation means I have neither the facilities nor typical familial conversation topics for hosting or attending dinners. These groups are clearly for families and couples, so why not be honest and say so?

Interestingly, I've mentioned my concerns to both church couples and singles; couples are shocked, maintaining I'm mistaken with my views resulting from something I apparently failed to say/do while there. Other singles have commiserated, however, remarking they had also felt awkward amidst the couples with whom they often had little in common.

Those living alone need acceptance *for who they are now*. Younger never-married, divorced, or widowed persons (elderly singles are apparently recognized by their "widows row" pew) seem confined by the unspoken assumption of full church acceptance *after* reconfiguring their lives into the standard pattern of pairs. ***However, this may never occur and we also desire a church, one cherishing us as-is.***

Singles are neither incomplete nor failures and have much to offer, but unrecognized in sermons and activities; moreover, hearing sermons assuming congregants are anticipating family holiday events or special gatherings with friends following church are especially difficult for those going home alone. I want to feel uplifted by attending services, not reminded of my loneliness and leaving feeling depressed.

I still consider myself more a UCC visitor than true member, and cannot help imagining that the church is often a place where Christ, who worked with many singles, might feel unwelcome. Yes, we are all imperfect, but as *James* advocates, it is not what is said but what is done that shows one's true heart. ***Does the UCC value persons outside traditional family patterns enough to acknowledge and include them meaningfully within?***

### **Possibilities/Comments**

Include singles in sermons, especially with more profound sermon topics. *Existence* of possibilities is different from their *occurrence*; speak to those faced with accepting unwanted gaps in their lives, persons whose dreams have disappeared or will remain unmet in this lifetime, or to those weary of hearing that joining clubs or volunteering equals fulfillment, etc.

Updated, interactive Web site. Aside from beneficial to all, a blog/column/conversation could eventually appear for singles.

Any structural changes cannot be *us vs. them* (...if singles want X, let THEM create it...) efforts; they should be we endeavors.

True incorporation and welcome of singles requires sincere desire; once begun, it must be a continuing process throughout the UCC's existence with its initial decision requiring careful thought.

## Essay 16

I believe that the Vermillion United Church of Christ, Congregational should strive to be Christ's ambassadors to the world, and that, to let everyone know what this means for us, the church motto should be: "they will know we are Christians by our love...."

In this conception the church has four critical responsibilities.

First, our church is a place to learn more fully about the Bible in particular and theology in general so that we can continually become better grounded in the faith that undergirds our work as Christ's ambassadors.

Second, our church is a place to celebrate through worship, music, play, food, and fellowship the beauty and bounty of this world.

Third, our church is a place to come for nurture and support as individually and collectively we deal with life's inevitable struggles, disappointments, and tragedies.

Fourth, our church is a place where we come together to think about how specifically we can better be Christ's ambassadors to the world, both as a church and as individuals.

From my perspective, while improvements are always possible, our church fulfills the first three responsibilities quite well. We do not do nearly as good a job in carrying out the fourth responsibility. To help strengthen our work in this area, I propose that, each year, the Church Cabinet develop a proposed action plan for the following year. Such a plan would be discussed and acted upon at the annual meeting and would be designed to suggest specific ways we as a church and as individuals might better meet our commitment to be Christ's ambassadors in the world.

## Essay 17

Over a number of years my concerns have been with the physical appearance and viability of the church structure and grounds and this brief essay addresses those items.

I only have annual reports back to 1980 that lists utilities in the budget for 1981 at \$5,500. This year's budget sums utilities up at \$12,344 of which natural gas is a part and is budgeted at \$4,344.

In our long range planning we need to look at ways to cut operating costs and use the funds saved for program expenses.

For several years I have been interested in Geo-Thermal as a possible method of reducing utility costs. When I built my home in 1968 we heated with propane and it cost about 32 cents per cubic foot. A few years later the price increased to about \$1.00 per cubic foot and my cost to heat the house from November thru March went from \$500 to \$800 per month during those winter months.

In 2002 I installed a Geo-Thermal system that provided heat in the winter time, cooling in the summer months and hot water at no cost each spring, summer and fall. My cost for propane as back up to the system during extremely severe weather dropped to \$500 to \$800 every two years, rather than \$500 to \$800 per month for heat in the winter time. There was no significant increase in the demand for electricity for the system that provided us with heating, cooling and 3/4ths of our hot water for the house.

A few years ago we did a major renovation of the church that added an elevator and a complete new and different heating system and a great many other things.

We used to have a gas fired boiler to heat the church. Now we have two gas fired furnaces in the sub-basement to heat the sanctuary. In the northeast corner of the basement we have a furnace that heats the north half of the basement. In the southwest corner of the basement by the elevator service room is a furnace that heats the south end of the basement to include the kitchen. In the hallway on the northeast side of the building is a small furnace with A/C that heats and cools the office suite on the first floor. In the attic is a small furnace that heats the classroom on the second floor at the south end of the church.

The two new furnaces in the basement have coils in the plenum installed in anticipation of cooling or Geo-Thermal being added at a later date.

Converting the whole church to Geo-Thermal at one time would save a lot of operating costs, but appears to be a major expense and disruption of church activities at one time. I would suggest that we convert the small furnace that heats and cools the office suite next year and do the next phase (one furnace) two years later.

Summer has slipped by and no action has been taken to replace the door and frame on the west side near the north end of the church. This needs to be done before cold weather this year.

The outside door to the elevator needs to be repaired or replaced and the column outside needs to be replaced. The church looks shabby on the west side.

## Essay 18

UCC Church is a great place for Vermillion. There is a nice mixture of people from all ages with a broad variety of skills, talents and interests. The conglomeration of retirees, late career professionals, young families, college students, and children are indicative of a vibrant congregation with a talented and energetic staff. Here are some of the things I would like UCCV to consider for the future.

### **Seek consultation for an effective visioning process**

There are experts in church growth (i.e., the Albin institute) who understand the intricacies of church development. Seeking an expert opinion can help us recognize those facets of the church that we take for granted, and can also help us to identify potential weaknesses. I am not an expert, but here are some of the areas I would like for us to think about. This should be part of a capital needs assessment that should come prior to a capital campaign.

**Congregation:** I am always surprised that the congregation allows the staff to make decisions with less input. In many ways, this seems “un-congregational”. I would like to challenge the congregation to understand facets of the church like membership, stewardship, and child and youth programming.

**Membership:** I would like for us to understand how people are attracted to the church, but more importantly, judge their level of engagement once they become members. It is easy to count the number of people on the rolls, but I worry that some new members may be not becoming connected with the church.

**Social justice:** One way to encourage people to become more active in the church is to provide even more activities for hands-on mission projects. Meals on Wheels is a wonderful opportunity, but consider habitat projects, clean-up projects, visitation projects, or other kinds of ways that people can come together to work through the church.

I would also like to see the church make sure that we deliberately budget for church funds to be spent on local, regional, and international mission projects. Presently, we fund some mission projects, but we often wait to make sure we have enough money before we do that.

As part of a capital campaign, we should seek to raise a substantial amount of money for some mission project (e.g., a Habitat for Humanity house or a local youth center)

**Adult education:** I would love to see additional adult educational opportunities. I fear that I have few ideas about how to make this happen.

**Music:** We have a wonderfully talented and committed music team. That team works closely with 60 or so volunteers in Vocal and Bell choirs who are willing to practice hard and learn new pieces of music. I would challenge that church to look to further expand and challenge those volunteers to perform two major works a year, part of a requiem mass for All Souls Day, and further expand the choral library. One way to make that happen is to have the choirs organize some of those things that the directors shouldn't need to such as robes, childcare, extra rehearsals, and many of the other non-music work that takes up some of the time of our music team.

Thank you for the opportunity to write this essay. I look forward to the church's future and hope to be a part of an even more vibrant and exciting congregation!