

Imagine a World of Kindness

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

April 7, 2024

Four and a half months ago, a group of sixteen people assembled to create a meaningful workshop that would invite congregational participation.

This was your Congregational Insight Team. They were the creative body of FRSers who led the efforts to learn what you imagine and dream for the future of our church. Together they created a workshop with a format and questions designed to invite you to open your hearts and minds and share your visions for our church over the next five years and beyond. Some of these people have been involved in similar planning initiatives over the past few decades. For others, this was their foray into such work with FRSUU.

This esteemed group collaborated to create and lead the Congregational Insight Workshops that 125 of you participated in. A smaller group of the team then interpreted the 757 ideas generated in these 12 workshops and 19 small groups.

Members of the Team include Jeff Bard, Tina Benik, Kathy Desilets, Ann Haaser, Michelle Kimball, Doug Latham, Leslie Lawrence, Andy Lobb, Rebecca Lobb, Annie Madden, Annie Maurer, Johnathon Pape, Alan Seale, and me. I want to especially thank Barbara Garnis and Joe Brouillet who stepped up last spring to lead this effort. Please join me in giving these folks a hearty FRS thank you.

From all that I have heard, the Congregational Insight Workshops were inspirational, visionary, practical, and filled with loving kindness. You listened to one another and imagined how we might commit our resources of space, programming, money, and time to programming, initiatives, and community partnerships that will help create the world we dream about and believe in. Together we are imagining church—this church—as we prepare to enter our 4th century together.

The 757 ideas you generated focused on adult programming, children's and teen programming, environmental impact activities, worship and music, outreach to the broader community, social

justice and inclusion, and our space and buildings, including Parish Hall.

Fifty-two percent of your ideas focused on the use of Parish Hall, communication and planning, worship services, and social justice and conclusion. 82 percent of your ideas expanded to focus on environmental impact activities and adult and youth programming.

The key findings indicate that you want to foster better member engagement, especially intergenerational relationships, including between newer and older members. Part of this includes finding additional ways to communicate within the church.

You want us to include children and youth more in all areas of church life, including in worship, as we did with Easter service. It is important to you that we also support their families and caregivers.

You appreciate when we engage with other churches and want more of that. You also see that what we have here could be appealing to the increasing number of disillusioned or "unchurched" people and you want us to reach out to them and welcome them at FRSUU.

You love worship and music and want us to balance and integrate some changes while also maintaining tradition. You imagined worship with alternative liturgy, more rituals, more sacred space, and more social justice. You are asking for the same experimentation with increasing the diversity of music while honoring our beautiful organ and traditional music.

Finally, and most cohesively, you were clear about the importance of us using Parish Hall for the community at large, as a way to raise revenue, as well as for our own uses.

In healthy and good UU fashion, you have different ideas of exactly what can be done with Parish Hall and how that would happen. Holding further discussions about those questions, including with others in the city, is a crucial part of our next steps.

We will be hosting two gatherings for community

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leaders on Tuesday, June 18. These meetings will be an opportunity for folks to share their ideas on what the city and its organizations need, as we imagine partnering with others for uses of our Parish Hall. Cynthia Walsh and Barbara Garnis are collecting names of people to invite. Please see them if you have suggestions.

Ghlee Woodworth, city historian and member of our grants and history teams, has been researching the history of Parish Hall. This will be helpful as we prepare to submit various grants once we are clear on our future vision for that space. I've learned a lot from her, and I know she will be sharing what she has learned with us all during the 300th year and through Yankee Homecoming activities.

Did you know that on August 28, 1877, FRS voted to build on the land on which Parish Hall sits? Architect Rufus Sargent designed the building which was named Fraternity Hall. Sargent also designed St. Anna's Chapel of St. Paul's, Institution for Savings, and the Kelley School. And, though the church still used the building, they also agreed to lease the building as a way to pay for the expense of construction.

Fraternity Hall opened on January 7, 1878. It was used for theater performances, lectures, concerts, rummage sales, and Sunday School events. The Parish Committee (or Board) did not take full power of the building until June 15, 1923, when it was renamed as Parish Hall.

I hope you will join us in person and online immediately after the service to learn more about the findings of these workshops and our next steps. There will be time for you to ask your questions too!

You might be wondering what these workshops have to do with our monthly ministry theme of kindness. They have a lot to do with kindness! Kindness is defined as the quality of being friendly, generous, and considerate. It's also one of those words that most dictionaries use to define it, as in "Kindness is the quality of being kind."

To me, kindness is when we put ourselves in the shoes of another person or part of creation, and

allow ourselves to sense what they need, or what would help them feel cared for, heard, and seen. Acts of kindness are embodied ways of saying, "I see you. You matter. Your pain matters. Your dreams and ideas matter."

True kindness is balanced with caring for ourselves. Being kind may be inconvenient at times. It may ask us to delay meeting our own needs, but kindness is not about being a martyr. In its purest form, kindness has no expectations. We are not looking for a thank you or returned favor. At its core, though, kindness allows us to care about others even as we care about ourselves.

You exemplified this kindness through what you shared in the Congregational Insight Team workshops. You shared that you care about the parents, caregivers, and elders in this church. You made it clear that we are part of the community and world around us and that our commitment to justice work is paramount. Your care about the earth was abundantly evident, as was your desire to know one another better.

All of this is consistent with our annual theme of interconnectedness. We are committed to understanding the interconnectedness of everything we do at the FRSUU. We know that how we treat each other is how we will be in the world, and that issues of social justice are inextricably interconnected.

Our spirituality, privately and together in worship, grounds and inspires our lives. It informs how we show up in the work of justice and how we respond to ourselves and others.

We know that everything is spiritual, and that service comes in a diversity of forms including kindness to a neighbor, smiling at a person who looks distraught, or canvassing and encouraging people to vote.

If we are to do these things well, by which I mean humbly and with good nature, we must understand and employ kindness. To start, we must be willing to imagine a world filled with kindness.

According to Mayo Clinic, "Kindness has been shown to increase self-esteem, empathy, and

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compassion, and improve mood. It can decrease blood pressure and cortisol, a hormone directly correlated with stress levels. People who give of themselves in a balanced way also tend to be healthier and live longer.”¹

The Mental Health Foundation goes on to say “Acts of kindness...can boost feelings of confidence, being in control, happiness, and optimism. They may also encourage others to repeat the good deeds they’ve experienced themselves, contributing to a more positive community.”²

What then keeps us from being kind? There are two primary reasons. First, we are afraid. Donna Cameron writes, “Fear of having your kindness rejected or misunderstood, fear of doing it wrong, fear of drawing attention to ourselves, and causing embarrassment. Beyond fear, we may not know the right thing to do, or we claim not to have time, or we’re often simply oblivious.”³

In an article in *The New York Times*, Catherine Pearson writes about the second reason we aren’t kinder. We aren’t kinder because we overthink it.⁴ We underestimate the impact our kindness may have on others. We second guess our impulses to be kind or critique our ideas of how to be kind. Pearson encourages us to keep it simple: use

our skills and interests when we look for ways to be kind. If we’re shy, write a note. If we’re an extrovert, stop and talk to someone who looks sad. If we paint, make a card. Kindness does not have to be large. Many of the kindest gestures are small. Follow your instincts.

Though it is simple, kindness does have important nuances. Next week I will preach on the differences between being kind and being nice. They are not the same thing.

I invite us all to look for chances to be kind, even if we think we already are. There can never be too much kindness in the world.

Everyone is invited to take a slip of paper or two on your way out the door. Each of these slips has an idea of an act of kindness we can do. These come from the Random Acts of Kindness Foundation. There is a PDF of these ideas for those online.

In a world bereft of kindness, may we be agents of change; may we turn and return to the power of kindness and know its simple gifts.

Amen.

1 Steve Siegle, Psy.D., “The art of kindness,” *Mayo Clinic Health System*, August 17, 2023. <https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/the-art-of-kindness#:~:text=Kindness%20has%20been%20shown%20to,be%20healthier%20and%20live%20longer>.

2 Michelle Tillis Lederman, CSP, SCC, “Making Gratitude Contagious,” *LinkedIn*, April 5, 2022. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/making-gratitude-contagious-lederman-csp-scc-leadership-speaker/>

3 Donna Cameron, “What Keeps Us from Being Kind?” *A Year of Living Kindly*, July 12, 2019. <https://ayearoflivingkindly.com/2019/07/12/what-keeps-us-from-being-kind/>

4 Catherine Pearson, “The Unexpected Power of Random Acts of Kindness,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2022.