

Vision a result of Praxis:

In church circles, the current wisdom has us all plan specifically for the future, for what we want our churches to be and look like. We are told, “if you do not know where you are going, you will never get there.” That is probably true. Sometimes, however, looking back at where we have been, gives us the wisdom to plan where we ought to go.

That was the nature of the vision process that St. Aidan’s followed two years ago. By examining our loves and assets, we were able to authentically describe who we were, and who we want to be in light of that present reality. We decided we were “the church in the woods that demonstrates God’s love through inclusive community, thoughtful exploration, loving service, and dedication to ecological ministry.” In each area, a lived history, sometimes not very consciously planned, brought the congregation to this place.



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Inclusivity: St. Aidan’s and Northside have been “inclusive” communities in a whole host of ways, race, age, gender, nationality, social status, physical and mental health, for a long time. In particular they have been at the forefront of acceptance of LGBT people. St. Aidan’s was the first church in the Diocese of Michigan to call a known lesbian or gay rector. Northside was the first, and for a long time only, “more light” Presbyterian Church and was instrumental in changing the climate in the Presbytery of Detroit so that when “local option” became a possibility in the ordination process, the presbytery supported it. The reality we have today, however, began long ago, when LGBT inclusion wasn’t even on the radar of most churches. Cleve Evans’ (Northside) and William Phillips’ (St. Aidan’s) personal ministries and challenges to these two congregations paved the way for both rich ministry and concrete identity.

Ecological Ministry: Our environmental ministry and the recent acquisition of the “Lakefront” property for prayer and conservation, also came as a result of “living” environmentalism long before we could name it as part of our vision. Because we lived this reality, the land donor, Betty Rees, knew she could trust us to conserve the beautiful 10-acre property for which she has been a steward for 60 years. We began greening our

building with the worst volunteer project I have ever experienced, blowing insulation into our two attics. As an added difficulty, neither of them have a floor to stand on. From there we went on to change our thermostats (7 day programmable) and light bulbs. We got serious about recycling. We encouraged the use of washable dishes and paper (biodegradable) products. We bought a new 95% efficient furnace, and we put energy efficient blinds in our nursery. We even (with collusion with the Lutheran Church – thanks to Ellen Magee) began to buy eco-palms for Palm Sunday and this year (see picture in this newsletter) we burned last years leftovers and returned palms to make eco-ashes for Ash Wednesday.

Last month, at the request of the Building and Grounds committee, the Administrative Council approved a trial period during which we will provide paper hot drink cups to all the 12-step groups that use the building to replace the Styrofoam ones they use now. Even though we have had church policies for years against using Styrofoam, we realized (as a result of one of the youth's GreenFaith activities) that the majority of our garbage each week is Styrofoam cups. These are not recycled, they go into a landfill somewhere.

There is no place where our vision, growing out of praxis, is more apparent than in the Eco-restoration we have been engaged in on our land. This began without much ecological awareness. We began to clear invasive species in order to make the church buildings more visible from Broadway. The understory along the east slope was so overgrown, it blocked all but a momentary view of the church from the road. So I bought a chain saw, and we began to remove the understory trees, starting with the honeysuckle that we had been told was unhealthy anyway. After removing the honeysuckle and buckthorn, two invasive species, the whole understory was essentially gone. Our slope provided a stark lesson about invasive species, once they start, they take over and nothing native can compete. From there we moved to the woods and cleared out more buckthorn and honeysuckle. This time we did it to make way for the planting of replacement hardwood trees required by the accessibility driven (see inclusive community above) renovation of our parking lot. In the woods, we saw the same story. We also witnessed the uncovering of a wondrous grove of dogwood trees just waiting to be liberated. Now they are liberated and growing. Since then, we have continued to work to make the woods healthier. We have had the help of service sororities, community service workers, friends from the neighborhood, and our own volunteer labor. Our last woods work day was consciously intergenerational. The paths we have constructed have made our woods more and more an offering to the community. Finally, in our vision process, we could name this concern, not just something we do, but a focus of our vision for the future.

Modern Restoration Work Done by Church Volunteers

- We cleared the eastern slope of the property of invasive understory. We planted service berry trees and a variety of native plants on the slopes to replace the invasive growth.
- In 2002 began invasive species removal in the wooded portion of the property. Hardwoods were planted and native dogwood nurtured.



We have been participating in what liberation theologians would call, letting praxis lead. By participating in inclusion and in environmental activity, we have learned and grown to understand these activities as central to our lives and holy God inspired and supported work. The liberation theologians were accused of developing their theology backwards. One should understand ones theology, they were told, and conform one's life to it. "Nonsense", they would reply, living life with love and justice informs and inspires ones theology, not the other way around.

Loving Service: One of our "loving service," activities has a similar story, the shelter. There are few churches or synagogues that would sponsor the overflow shelter when their physical plant resources are as limited as ours are. We can only have the homeless individuals who sleep here each year as guests if we are willing to have them be in the most central and sacred parts of our facility.



This work also has antecedents that helped our communities know that this is the right thing to do. We were one of the first congregations to host an “Interfaith Hospitality Network family.” The genius of this program (IHN is now at Alpha House) was that it asked congregations to have families live in their very facility and to serve them there. The families would rotate from one facility to another. This was principally designed to help religious communities get to know the real face of homelessness as it was experienced by whole families, particularly by children. Eventually the whole operation moved to Alpha House which was much better for the families. Yet in the years it rotated, it opened the minds of religious congregations throughout the county. I know it helped me accept a position on one of the mayor’s committees on homelessness and to be a founder of Religious Action for Affordable housing that exists to raise money in the religious community to fund more permanent affordable housing stock. This is another story of praxis leading vision.

What we do affects how we understand God’s work and what we do, often then defines who we are as a community and the vision we make for our future.
Susan McGarry, rector, St. Aidan’s