

Come Hungry, Serve Fed, Leave Changed *A Future Story for University Christian Church*

August 2020

*We hope you are inspired by University Christian Church's future story. As you read, please keep in mind that it's more like an abstract painting than a photograph, meant to vitalize, not codify, our future. We passionately believe our church transforms lives through Christ. Therefore, the central theme is personal and community transformation through God's divine love. While many characters are fictional, God has a place for each of us in the church's future. **You are the most important person in this story!***

PART ONE: “🎵 I see a church with a vis-ion; I see a church with a mis-sion. I see a church with its doors open wide, and the poor and the rich wor-ship God side by side, and the young and the old have both put down their pride, and yes, we who seem dif-fer-ent don't have to hide, and there all of God's chil-dren can sweet-ly a-bide!🎵” Jessica softly sang as she set pumpkins, hay, and miniature cornucopias around the University Christian Church's newly built amphitheater. These words had been swirling around in her head all week - a lyrical image of how the church should look.

Jessica looked up from her task, deep in thought and came face to face with Miriam, her four year old daughter. Miriam was done helping harvest the last of the tomatoes in the community garden and she was covered in red tomato juice from nose to chin.

“Did you have tomatoes, Miriam?” she asked.

“Yes Mommy. We picked so many that I had to eat some to get them to fit into the basket.”

“Miri, are you telling me we have more tomatoes than we know what to do with?”

“Yes Mommy, and there are still so many more ripening on the vines.”

Good thing we have a full harvest, Jessica thought to herself. The community garden had gotten her through her pregnancy with Miri four and a half years ago, so she thanked God (again) for leading her feet to this particular intersection when her hungry belly (and heart) needed food.

“Come hungry, serve fed, leave changed” read the sign on the top of the garden gate. Those words had become more true with every encounter she had at University Christian Church.

Shirley Morrison approached with a warm, wet washcloth for Miri's tomato stained face. “Come here, Miri” she cooed lovingly. She was “Auntie Shirley”, unofficial grandmother, and official Godmother to the little girl. Their bond was undeniable. Shirley and Lorel Morrison helped found

the Community Garden, and it seemed they were always there. Now, four and a half years later, Jessica and Miri had spent so many days together, working side by side with the Morrison family that she couldn't imagine life without them, or the rest of her church family. They were always doing something, but the doing had a purpose: to serve the community a dish full of the risen Christ and seasoned with the flavors of true diversity and authentic hospitality. Jessica thanked God (again) for clearing the path for her to find this church.

PART TWO: Actually, quite literally, the path had been cleared for her that first winter in Hyattsville. Paths had been built from her new housing development to the church, through a partnership between the developer, the county park and planning commission, and the church. Jessica remembered walking out of her new apartment and setting off for some fresh air, to quell the nausea of early pregnancy and get her bearings in the new neighborhood. She quickly discovered the lovely cultivated path behind her building, and found herself by University Christian Church's playground, walking labyrinth, and the Community Garden.

The church, it turned out, was in a growth phase too. There were a number of active, long time members, and a number of active, new members too, many from the new developments. It was in the era of Covid-19 and everything was different. 'What a time to be a newcomer in America' she remembered thinking often during those days. But with every *Intersection*, multicultural meal, online meeting and advocacy project; Jessica had felt more and more like this was really home.

The pair sauntered over to the playground, and rocked on the swings. "*Intersection* starts soon!" Jessica said to Miriam. *Intersection* was the church's new worship style. Jessica and Miri both appreciated that the small groups for children, youth, and adults were all studying the same bible story. Jess had been trained to be a small group leader by Robin Apparicio, a church member and small group specialist - the church had even paid for it! Miri loved being part of her Children's Worship and Wonder circle and adored her kind Storytellers Sara Hindsley and Emily Hill. The service also included time for prayer partners, songs, a meal, and a sermon. It was always offered online and in-person, and alternated indoors and outside in the amphitheater, followed by communion in the garden. And, four times a year, Ramona Crawford organized all the churches in Hyattsville to worship together - boy was THAT hard to pull off! *Intersection* was the result of the church's decision to be very intentional about prayer and bible study, by incorporating it right into the worship service. Jessica and Miriam loved it!

Jessica pumped her swing. *You have to swing back before you can swing forward*, she thought. The church had purposefully swung back into bible, prayer, song, and worship, invigorating our relationship with Jesus as Lord. Newly energized and newly organized, the church was now swinging forward, to engage with the deepest needs of the neighborhoods around the church. Jessica and Miriam pumped, further and further back, further and further forward.

Tonight was especially exciting because, after *Intersection*, the annual Hyattsville Harvest Festival would take place. Jessica loved the Harvest Festival. It brought so many people

together: UCC members, volunteers, garden enthusiasts, those who received food donations from the garden, and community members whose noses led them to the abundance of treats waiting at UCC. Tonight, she could see Scott Dodro and Hayden Clay working the grills, talking to Ray Smith. Whatever they were cooking smelled delicious. Jessica's favorite memories of the Harvest Festival included walking around the tables spread about the garden, talking to friends, and enjoying delicacies prepared from various parts of the world, each celebrating the harvest season. This evening she had her eyes set on the mooncakes from Vietnam, a specialty prepared during the harvest season as thanks for a plentiful harvest.

Jessica looked up to see Chike and Meiko coming down the hill.

PART THREE: Chike had been couch surfing and sleeping in the woods when he walked into the Day Shelter a couple years ago. That day had changed everybody's life! Chike soon joined the Day Shelter's life-skills mentorship program for young adults who wanted to have a partner to help them live into their purpose as children of God. He flourished there and in the church too, joining the praise band, and eventually becoming a mentor himself. The Mityga family, a caring couple in the church, had invited him to live in their basement and he had been lucky to find a stable job, and his church celebrated with him!

Meiko's story was equally miraculous but in a different way. On a Friday night, Meiko was (in her words) "mindlessly scrolling through Facebook" when she saw an ad that said, "Come hungry, serve fed, leave changed." Curious about the food imagery, she clicked. Up popped a vibrant website with vivid hues, a diverse crowd of smiling faces, and a kind of hypnotic music that she had not heard before. She saw a video of the Harvest Festival; other images showed children holding the corners of a felt blanket, young adults eating bread in an outdoor worship service, and people pulling up potatoes in the community garden. But most important was the bold banner: *University Christian Church openly affirms the full inclusion of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender, and non-binary persons (LGBTQ) in our church's life and ministry.* Meiko was sold: she visited University Christian Church that same Sunday. Two years later, she and her wife were baptized at University Christian, had joined the praise band, and she was serving as project coordinator for the church's collaboration with the Police Department, finding and training ride-along partners from the church to help address mental health crises with the City of Hyattsville.

"Hey, what are you up to, Jessica?" said Chike as they approached the swings.

"We're just hangin' out."

Jessica smiled, looking at Chike, marveling at what God had accomplished through him. In a way, "hanging out" with friends like Chike was the seed of UCC's first successful advocacy effort. Through Chike, the church developed close friendships with a number of their homeless neighbors. After a biblical study on systemic injustices, church members knew they had to do more about homelessness in Prince George's County. Chike took the lead, and working hand in

hand with homeless neighbors, all the churches of Hyattsville demanded change - that Prince George's County at least ensure that no children should ever be homeless. The county listened, and passed legislation requiring developers to build affordable housing. The churches did their part too, with wrap-around care like the mentoring program. Everyone could see the difference - no more mothers with children shuffling from church-to-church in the winter months.

Chike's commitment to service led him quite naturally to his role as mentor for Omar, a student at Northwestern High School.

PART FOUR: Omar was fourteen, and a freshman, when he met Chike. He was the first in his family to attend high school, and he felt he had a lot to live up to for his mother, who had immigrated from El Salvador when she was in her 20s. Still, it was really hard - Omar's mother worked two jobs and regularly relied on Omar to run the household. One morning that fall, he had woken late, and scrambled to drop off his two younger siblings at school. Starving, he stopped by CVS for a snack, and before he knew it, it was the end of second period!

Omar ran to school and slid into the building as quietly as he could. He made it down the hallway right as the bell rang - crisis averted! He walked into 3rd period with a teen's sense of satisfaction. Five minutes into the period his guidance counselor appeared and curtly asked him to follow her. 'Oh no, here we go,' Omar thought - this is how it starts. Omar waited for the axe to fall, but to his surprise, his counselor began telling him about a new partnership with UCC, a program partnering local mentors with students who would benefit from additional support.

"Are you interested?" Omar was both intrigued and skeptical, not knowing what to expect but secretly hopeful this mentor person could provide support. Chike met Omar after school at the building next door that was always buzzing with activity -- the church at the intersection. Chike seemed friendly and all, but Omar was nervous! He was shocked when Chike did not bombard him with questions and instead led him over to the garden --- and asked if he would like to help him with the weeding! The activity was remarkably relaxing.

Now, five years later, Omar was a high school graduate, and still came to UCC's garden -- his place of zen. Looking back, Omar was touched by the consistency Chike provided during his turbulent high school years. Chike was there his sophomore year, when he needed support finishing an impossible English essay. Chike was there in 11th grade, when Omar was exploring vocational careers. Chike was there when Omar began working part-time and needed help developing effective time management skills. This evening they were together again, celebrating at the Harvest Festival.

Jessica and Miriam joined Omar and Chike as they walked to the amphitheater. "Jess" was now an old friend.

PART FIVE: As the evening light began to fade, the amphitheater came to life. Jessica could smell the grilled veggies Scott and Hayden had prepared for the Harvest meal. A sense of excitement was in the air as groups of children of all different colors ran about greeting each other with hugs and peals of laughter. In the dimmed, artificial light, Jessica could see the Video Team of Chris and Joseph sitting in their elevated chairs, readying the cameras and making sure all the settings were in order for live streaming. Jess heard the contemporary soft rock sounds of Gillian, Gladstone, Jean, Bill and the singers creating the ambiance for the incoming groups of families, friends, and neighbors. Jessica always enjoyed the music of this church, the praise band with their contemporary, soft rock sound, and the more traditional choir and ensemble, who loved to perform those divinely familiar hymns from her childhood.

Chike was singing lead tonight. His smooth tenor voice was perfect for the song. Meiko was singing back up, and her honeyed soprano harmony melded with the other voices to sing a modern rendition of “They Will Know We are Christians by Our Love”. The whole congregation joined in. “🎵 *We will work with each other, we will work side by side. And we’ll guard each one’s dignity and save each one’s pride -- And they’ll know we are Christians by our love, by our love* 🎵”. Jessica breathed in the melodious atmosphere, taking in the experience with all five of her senses. “Yes, they’ll know we are Christians by our love,” she sang, her voice full of joy, knowing that right now, this was exactly where she was supposed to be.

A Prologue: How we were Hungry, Fed, and Changed How University Christian Church Was Transformed

The new ventures in the future story are exciting, but it is equally important to think about how they’ll come to happen - the ideas have to be babies before they grow up! So there’s a second part to the future story, a prologue really, the story of how University Christian Church learns to let go, and remake itself. This is very hard and controversial, as you’ll see from our version of it, below. It’s a story of honoring and then saying goodbye to cherished habits, in order to make room for the energy, time, and money needed to ‘swing forward’ vigorously. At the same time, every future vision in the story is firmly planted in the church’s current members strengths and needs in 2021. Here’s a story of the changes University Christian made, again written as if 5 years in the future, looking backward to the years 2021 - 2023:

The most dramatic and difficult transformation was the major organizational changes needed to make *Intersection* worship happen.

As a crucial first step, the church hired a *full-time Church Manager* (with web and graphic arts skills), clearing the Senior Minister’s schedule of administrative work, to concentrate on **leading**

the *Worship Leadership Teams* to plan *Intersection* worship! To cover this crucial new position within a tight budget, some other positions sadly had to be curtailed, which was necessary but extremely difficult.

Then the old Deacon Team role was transformed, to being *Worship Leadership Teams*, taking monthly turns being involved in both the planning and execution of the whole service. To show the church supported this seriously, a lot of time and money was invested in leadership training for the *Worship Leadership Teams*.

Small groups were the linchpin of *Intersection*. Yet the church knew that small group plans had often failed at University Christian in the past. So rather than layering small groups on top of existing social and bible study groups, the church asked *all* the groups in the church, even Sunday school, and outreach efforts, to re-imagine themselves as *growth-minded small groups*, each with something wonderful to offer to church neighbors and community. Small groups were still specialized, social, and fun, but now always included prayer, bible study, service to the church community, and participation in *Intersection*. To help the groups focus on attracting newcomers, the *Church leaders* actively updated the small groups section of the website with each group's special focus, meeting times, contact and volunteer info.

In addition to creatively mixing small groups with worship, a lot more effort was invested in leadership this time. As part of this, the role of Elder was reinvented. Small group leaders, and others in leadership roles, were asked to be Elders. Or put another way, *each Elder was asked to mentor or lead a small group providing insight into the weekly Bible verse and ideas on how to share the message with their group members---* but again with the church providing lots of quality lay leadership training to make it successful.

What about our outreach efforts? The church started to take housing and homelessness issues even more seriously, led by the homeless themselves. And the church started the new High School Mentoring program. What made all that work? It started with a deep look at the complex question of whether our current programs perpetuated problems or solved them. After that study, the church chose to narrow its outreach focus, *following Christ's example by emphasizing programs that could help people transform their lives*: the Day Shelter and related advocacy work, and the new Mentoring Program at Northwestern High School. To facilitate the mentoring program, the church hired a part-time *Mentoring Program Coordinator*. As work on those areas ramped up, other efforts began to ramp down. It was hard to give up some good programs we'd done for years, but the focus not only gave us energy to succeed and to better reach out to our neighbors, it also helped strengthen the bonds of church friendships and relationships.

Lastly, back in 2020, the church had developed a set of themes that represented University Christian's unique missions: Social Justice and Civil Rights, Outreach, Bible Centered preaching and teaching, and Praise and Worship. With that in mind, and with the new directions outlined in the future story, the church gave careful consideration to replacing the old

ministry director positions with new ones that best reflected the church's sense of its strongest ministries: *Prayer Life and Bible Study Ministry, Evangelism, Music and Art, Property and Garden, and Justice and Compassion.*