

Personal Statements from Team Members

Karin Zaugg Black

I have grown up in this church community, being an attendee and member for 42 years, and I have so many memories of SFBC from all the stages of my life: as a child, as a youth, as a young adult, and as a mother.

As I embarked on this work of the Long Range Taskforce, I found myself in more of the “historical preservation” archetype described in our recommendations document – I love the sanctuary building, I find peace looking at the stained glass windows, and I have so many memories of experiences in our spaces.

As we did more research, and looked at the external forces impacting our church, such as a decreasing interest in formal church nationwide, the strong trend of “un-churched” folks in the greater Seattle region, and doing hard thinking about how we do worship and other aspects of our community, I moved to more of the “evolutionary change” archetype. I want to embrace changes to better communicate who we are, in order for others to discover us and join us, and to adapt our worship, music and other activities, in order to attract more people and ensure our church survival.

Then came the COVID-19 pandemic and a huge awakening about institutionalized racism and systemic oppression and discrimination of our BIPOC neighbors. These huge happenings and shifts, I feel, are pushing us to change faster, based on the realities that we are now facing as a community.

The Taskforce’s thoughtful research and discussions, and listening to the focus groups’ conversations, led me to think more deeply about *how* are we supporting our environmental aspirations? Inclusiveness? Race and Social Justice? Outreach and supporting our broader community? Then there is the financial reality that some of our major building tenants are leaving our building space, creating a big decrease in our rent income, as well as other issues that we outline in our report with our building spaces.

That led me to be more in the “revolutionary change” archetype, as I began to feel that we must leverage our biggest financial asset, our land and buildings, to be bold and reimagine how we can create our space for our community, better living our values.

As we have experienced in the last five months, we can do virtual worship, virtual children’s camp, virtual bible study, virtual happy hours - because it’s the *people* that are at the center of our community, and not the physical space. The people are the key element of what makes our SFBC community special.

So, that is my reflection on my own journey through this process. I challenge us to think boldly. Our Taskforce's hope is that our research and thinking can now inform you, our SFBC community members, and you can use this as a base from which to spur more thoughtful discussions and actions about how we want to move forward with our collective future.

Karin Zaugg Black

Angie Buysse

I am a 56-year-old, Euro-White woman who was raised in the Catholic faith. I never thought I would step inside a Baptist Church. It took a lot of encouragement and desperation (having visited a dozen other churches in the area) to convince me to try Baptist. The name and the building were significant barriers to entry, but once I entered, I never left. I have been a member of SFBC for eight years. I like being a member of SFBC because of its progressiveness, inclusivity and focus on social justice.

Being a part of the Long Range Planning team has enabled me to learn more about SFBC's history, meet more congregants and research how other communities "church." I tend to approach most planning activities from a practical, business viewpoint. One of my contributions to this effort is to encourage us to think about how SFBC is addressing its financial fiduciary responsibility. I believe that we have a responsibility to maximize how we use our assets and resources to deliver value to our members and our community. One of the questions is "are we delivering appropriate value for our \$18 million property asset?"

I believe our best direction forward is to adopt the faith of Ray Kinsella, a corn farmer in Iowa in the movie "Field of Dreams." Ray was urged by mysterious voices one night in his cornfield to build a baseball diamond. Despite sacrificing income from the cornfields, he was driven by his faith of "if you build it, they will come." In Ray's case, he built the baseball diamond and in a short time, baseball players were brought back to life and people from all over the town, state and country showed up to watch the game. "If you build it, they will come" is more than aspiration. If we have faith and execute the right plan, we can build a future that brings people back to life!

Angie Buysse

Larry Green

Serving with the Long Rang Planning Team helped me to appreciate how deeply the congregants of SFBC care about what the church means to them and ways that we will change and grow in the future. Many different concerns and ideas were shared with us in our focus groups which helped to clarify priorities and also revealed new opportunities. The consistent message I recall from your shared ideas was for us to be different, be bold and be better. Our team remains committed to providing recommendations that reflect the best ideas of all that were shared with us. Thank you for supporting the planning team and now let us work together to realize the vision you helped us to create.

In service to you,
Larry Green

Deepty Gulati

Our family moved to Seattle three years ago knowing that God had chosen a perfect Church family already for us. We were welcomed and loved from day one; that warm welcome confirmed that SFBC will soon become our home Church.

Serving on the LRP committee showed me a different side of SFBC; slightly different than the usual perfectly organized worship service on Sunday. The experience helped me learn that isms exist at the Church also and that gracefully they can be acknowledged for us to do better as a community. We all members didn't agree always and brought our own perspectives that are shaped by our own personal walk with Christ. I co-led two focus groups and I heard love, hope, anger, disappointment – all emotions together! These deep conversations convinced me that it is time to change and to outline new opportunities to do Church differently yet focus on faith and tradition.

Change is difficult but constant! There isn't a magic wand to shorten this process. I am hopeful that we all are in this together and I pray for God's will to be done. AMEN!

Deepty Gulati

Cherry Johnson

It took me several weeks of discernment before agreeing to serve on this Long Range Planning Team. In part that was because of other commitments, but there were also ideological barriers. I am not one who likes to identify as "Christian" because in my world that label is too tarnished by stories of exclusion, condemnation and harm. In addition, I prefer to address systemic oppression (racism, sexism, classism) by starting new inclusive institutions rather than trying to

“fix” old ones. That being said, I am a cradle American Baptist, and the traditions and music and texts and stories are woven deep into my personal tapestry. I still find the life and teachings of Jesus revolutionary and compelling, though not singularly so. I am not even close to what most would term “Christian,” and yet, while it is true that God-language does not work for me, spirituality is central in my life. I engage with the Mystery at every opportunity -- through contemplative practice, through communing with nature, and spirit-dancing with my fellow human beings. I guess you could say I live at the intersection of Christian heritage, Baptist tradition, Interfaith, Agnosticism and Radical Spirituality. I believe that the institutional church has become largely irrelevant, and that it is a steep uphill climb for remaining progressive churches like ours who wish to be relevant to find ways to do that with integrity. As a social worker, I worked for many years in AIDS and end of life care, and I bring insights from that work to my thinking about the church. We may be scared of death as a society, but death is a natural part of life – for institutions as well as individuals. Deaths are transitions, and also acts of faith, because in death we are asked to give ourselves to the Mystery in order for whatever follows to flower.

In 1947, when he was a student at Crozer Theological Seminary, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a paper about the influence of the ancient mystery religions on Christianity. He wrote about how Christianity adopted many of its beliefs and practices from the Persian religion of Mithraism, the Mycenaean-Greek Cult of Dionysus, and others. Some of these appropriations included the practices of baptism and a communion meal, the cruel death and later resurrection of the central figure, the concept of trinity, the notion of being born again, the idea of sins being washed away, and phrases like “The Lord is risen,” “Dayspring from on high,” and “Sun of righteousness.” At the conclusion of his paper, King stated

To discuss Christianity without mentioning other religions would be like discussing the greatness of the Atlantic Ocean without the slightest mention of the many tributaries that keep it flowing. Christianity, however, survived because it appeared to be the result of a trend in the social order or in the historical cycle of the human race. ... The staggering question that now arises is, what will be the next stage of man's [sic] religious progress?

It is that final question that intrigues me. Does Christianity as a religion need to step aside so that we can see what flowers next? What IS the “next stage?” That, in fact, is one of the central questions our team has had to ask on behalf of SFBC. I came into this process ready to advocate for our role as benevolent hospice workers for the dying institutional church, and I still believe that is our long-term calling. However, I heard a loud and clear response, especially from focus group members, that they are not yet ready to release SFBC ... that the majority still feel strengthened by our treasured community for a call to the sacred work of peace and justice in our world. Because of this, I shifted my focus from “How do we help the church have a good death?” to “How can we be relevant for the immediate future?” “How can we shift our budget from buildings to benevolence?” “How can we follow the Way of Jesus without getting bogged down by the church named for him?” I hope that our final report and recommendations speak to these questions and yours in a helpful way. I hope that we as a community are able to carry this vision forward individually and collectively. And I hope that our community is well-served as we do.

It is a worthy leap of faith. It is a journey -- a calling -- worthy of embrace. If you're willing to take the leap, I'm right there with you.

I want to thank my fellow team members for their gifts: Angie Buysse for her calm demeanor and constant support, her keen skill in summarizing and her ability to swim the tide of metrics; Jim Segaar for the voluminous research he did about churches and change, for his relentless ability to pour out draft after draft of documents, and for his wicked humor; Karin Zaugg Black for her boundless enthusiasm, her raw honesty and willingness to change, and her constant advocacy for young adults and for children, youth and families; Larry Green for his humble reminders about best practices and accountability, his capacity for bringing us back from the intellectual to the personal or practical as needed, and for his ever-soothing voice; and Deepty Gulati for her ability to step out of the silence to say exactly what was needed at a given moment, her integrity and willingness to dissent, and her unerring vision of a positive future for her daughter and other children. I also want to thank all who shared their truths and their visions in the focus groups; listening with you was my favorite part of this process. It has been a journey of love.

We have long waited for this moment. From our hands to yours . . .

Cherry Johnson

Jim Segaar

As I consider the past year's work by our Long Range Planning team, two messages stand out for me.

For such a time as this – Like Queen Esther in the Hebrew scriptures, we have not chosen to live in this particular time of great disruption - and great opportunity, but we are here now in these liminal times – when many forces seem to be pushing us in the direction of adjustment and change. We cannot choose our time, but we can choose how we will live in it. We can see our changing situation as a fearful obstacle, or as an exciting opportunity. Our planning team chooses the latter, and it is my belief that our congregation will also embrace the opportunities for spiritual growth before us.

Diversity is our strength – At times it appears that we as a congregation don't agree on many things that historically have been important to churches. We welcome divergent beliefs, rather than demanding conformity. And we long for a congregation that more closely reflects the ethnic and economic diversity of our community. God knows we don't always get it right when it comes to welcoming all people. But our hearts long to be a beloved community that truly welcomes and encourages everyone.

My personal beliefs are considered “edgy,” maybe even a little dangerous, by my very conservative birth family. Even though I've moved well past the boundaries of my Christian

Reformed upbringing, I still find strength and inspiration in some traditions, especially in music. An old hymn I learned as a child includes these words:

*Many things about tomorrow,
I don't seem to understand.
But I know who holds the future,
and I know who holds my hand.*

SFBC, we may not know exactly where we are going, but I hope and pray that we continue to go there together.

Jim Segaar