

BAPTISM, CONFIRMATION, STAR WARS & VISON/PATHWAY FOR ROME FIRST – WHAT DO THEY ALL HAVE IN COMMON?

In the Baptismal Covenant that we use to celebrate Confirmation I ask the Candidates the following questions concerning their renunciation of Sin and Profession of Faith –

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?

I do.

We celebrated the reception of the Confirmation class of 2016 a few weeks ago and baptized three new members into the Body of Christ. As we shared together in worship and the confirmation class and those being baptized were asked the historic questions that allow them to publicly profess their Faith in Jesus Christ, I was reminded of STAR WARS and the recent Vision Pathway Team Report. Here's how -

The Star Wars Franchise continues to make history and impact culture far beyond the bounds of its cinematic and technological contributions to the craft of theatrical entertainment. The theological implications of the plots for all the movies/story lines in the franchise have the classic juxtaposition of good versus evil. "Star Wars" has powerful themes, within a well-constructed galaxy and adventure narrative that appeals to the times. The story centers on the battle between the evil Empire and virtuous Rebellion, which appeals for its action as well as the injustice that is being fought. But the narrative moves beyond a conventional political and military fight to deeper considerations of character, friendship, technology, transcendence and redemption. Literary critic and philosopher René Girard argues that the most enduring stories function on these two levels by simultaneously appealing to different audiences, with the deeper level effectively subverting and deepening the most superficial level over time.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, there was no God. Or not, at least, the walking, talking God of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, who sorrows, warns, blesses, commands, promises, sees, hears and touches.

Instead of God, George Lucas' *Star Wars* franchise speaks of 'The Force'. Taken from Carlos Castaneda's *Tales of Power*, the term nevertheless carries clear connections with more recognizable theology. For instance, the blessing 'May the Force be with you' echoes an old Christian one of 'May God be with you'. In addition, the voice of the spectral Jedi Master Obi-Wan proclaims to young Luke Skywalker 'Remember, the Force will be with you always', reflecting Jesus' comforting of his disciples: 'And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age', (Matthew 28:20)

The "Dark Side" of the FORCE or "evil" is an ever pervasive and almost inescapable inevitability in the ongoing unfolding saga of a galaxy far, far away. Unfortunately the pervasive presence of evil is not limited to a long time ago or even far, far away. We do not live a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away but live in this present age. In this present age what are we called to do to confront evil and injustice in whatever forms they present themselves? How will we offer hope and seek to engage in ministries of reconciliation and transformation?

The Rome First Vision/Pathway Team was tasked with proposing a Pathway/Vision to guide our congregation into God's preferred future. One of the guiding questions was -"How will we offer hope and seek to engage in ministries of reconciliation and transformation?"

The Vision Team was appointed by the One Board and began meeting in November 2015. The Vision /Pathway Team met and prayed, studied, conferenced, read books, article and blogs, prayed some more, met, discussed, prayed some more, looked at historical trends for Rome First, asked questions of folks inside the walls of Rome First and in the larger community, prayed some more, examined timelines, demographic data, census reports and statistical projections and prayed some more. The Vision/Pathway Team made their report and recommendations to the last meeting of the One Board. It is the consensus of the Vision/Pathway Team and the members of the One Board that Rome First is uniquely gifted and presently positioned to "Serve Rome by loving and welcoming all as partners in transformation"

The following report was presented to the One Board and unanimously adopted for implementation.

Vision/Pathway Team Report

1) Rome First UMC Visioning Team

Jason Dunn, Lisa Schlenk, Susi Edwards, Brett Horton, Tom Brown, Cindy McGehee, Renee Webb, Gaines Dempsey ,Kirsten Taylor - Staff Members -Robert Brown, Anjie Woodworth, Evan McElreath, Dawn Daniel, Jennifer Talley

2) We were charged to create/clarify the 2020 vision for Rome First UMC

3) What we have done as a Vision Pathway Team

- a. Prayer
- b. Introspection
- c. Conversation
 - i. With each other
 - ii. With members of Rome First
 - iii. With the Rome Community

4) What we discovered

a. The Love of God manifest in the lives of the members of Rome First is taken out of the "church" and "planted/shared" in the community to meet existing needs in the community.

b. Rome First has a rich history of identifying needs in our community and implementing programs to address the needs in the community. Examples include Community Kitchen, Free Clinic of Rome, etc ...

5) What we believe: Our Mission

- a. Love God,
- b. Love People,
- c. Serve the World

6) Our vision, how do we accomplish our Mission, is that Rome First will:

- a. **"Serve Rome by loving and welcoming all as partners in transformation"**

7) Our recommended priorities are:

- a. Adapt current practices and structures to build a culture of welcome within the walls of

Rome First UMC. Be transformed so that we intentionally build a welcoming culture within the walls of Rome First UMC that extends to building new relationships in the community.

- b. Focus the gifts and resources of Rome First on transformational ministry
- c. Facilitate collaboration and cooperation for transformation of our community, offering a way for organizations that have needs to publicize those needs while organizations and individuals who desire to lend support are made aware of the needs in our community. The initial focus will be on the foster care crisis in our community.

8) Next steps

Invite the members of Rome First to engage with the One Board so that the body of Christ at Rome First can intentionally act on the recommended priorities over the next four years.

In one of the articles that we had the opportunity to read during the Vision/Pathway process I read this quote from an article by John Stott entitled –“Qualities of the Faithful Christian Communities”. I share two quotes from that article that should challenge us as we seek to “live into” our Vision/Pathway in this coming ministry year.

•“Every Christian should be both conservative and radical; conservative in preserving the faith and radical in applying it.”

•“These are the marks of the ideal Church: love, suffering, holiness, sound doctrine, genuineness, evangelism and humility. This is what Christ desires to find.”

When we were celebrating the baptism and confirming the 2016 confirmation class, I asked the confirmands to answer the historic questions of faith and I asked them of myself then and now.

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?
I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?
I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in his grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the Church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations, and races?
I do.

If you “Do” reaffirm your faith and remember your baptism and are thankful, then how will you join with other members of Rome First as we “Live into” our Vision/Pathway for the future? That Vision/Pathway is - **“Serve Rome by loving and welcoming all as partners in transformation”**

The Force is with us always! The best of all is God is with us! Will you join me in making this faith journey together in pursuing our shared Vision/Pathway?

I'll see you here in worship and out in the community “being the church”!

Shalom,

Robert ><