

Four-Month Learning & Discernment Project - 10/1/25-1/7/26

Of the Justice-Focused Resilience Hub Shepherdding Team

First Congregational Church UCC, Salem, OR

Purpose

To guide the new Resilience Hub Shepherdding Team in discerning the details of the Resilience Hub we want to launch, integrating insights from spiritual infrastructure theory, contextual justice work, and financial sustainability models.

Outcomes by January 7, 2026

- A concrete concept for the Hub—vision, purpose, initial programs, partners, and space use—building on the June 2025 congregational vote.
- A financial sustainability sketch (revenue streams, grants, stewardship tie-ins), to be refined later with the UCC Church Building & Loan Fund (CB&LF).
- A list of resources and next-step partnerships (e.g., entrepreneurial faith cohort, CB&LF, Oregon Faith Partnership Network).
- A brief Equity Reflection Summary describing who is centered in the concept and how inclusion will guide next steps.
- A presentation for Council in late January and for the congregation at the Annual Meeting, Feb 1 2026.

Completed Orientation

- Sept 7: Field visit to Leaven Community / Salt & Light Church (Portland)
- Oct 1: Introductory call with CB&LF
- Oct 8: Field-trip debrief and orientation to the four-month plan

10/22: Seeing the Invisible

Theme: Naming current and hidden infrastructures

- Definition: *Invisible infrastructure* refers to the systems and assumptions that undergird organizational life but are often only noticed when they fail.¹ In congregations, this may include expectations about worship, leadership, space, or finances that quietly shape what is possible.
- **Anchor Readings:**
 - Rev. Terry Moe, *The Bush Still Burns: How Spirituality and Organizing Transformed a Church and Its Community*. (Fortress Press, 2021).
 - Sue Phillips, “*The Spiritual Infrastructure of the Future*,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (2020).

- **Practice:**
 - Reflect on The Bush Still Burns: what stood out for you in this story?
 - Map FCCUCC’s own “invisible infrastructures” (assumptions, utilities, bottlenecks).
- **Homework:** Create a collage, drawing, or piece of art that depicts the spiritual infrastructure, desire paths, and Hub ideas that rest within your spirit.

11/5 & 19: Breaking Assumptions & Following Desire Paths

Theme: Exploring new forms of spiritual community

- Definition: A *desire path* is the informal route people create when their needs or instincts lead them off the established path — for example, worn trails across a lawn where people cut corners instead of following the paved sidewalk. In spiritual life, desire paths reveal where people are already finding meaning, belonging, and resilience outside of formal religious structures.²
- **Anchor Readings:**
 - Angie Thurston & Casper ter Kuile, *How We Gather* (Harvard Divinity School, 2015). [*Shelley is sharing a video conversation as well.*]
 - Casper ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual* (HarperOne, 2021) [*choose excerpts that speak to you*].
- **Practice:** *this will be spaced out over two sessions*
 - Each member visits:
 - one local “desire-path” space (yoga, arts collective, activist hub, mutual-aid group, etc.);
 - one local congregation (outside FCCUCC);
 - one online congregation or worshipping community.
 - Share insights: What energized us? What felt tired? What practices could inform the Hub?
 - Identify which church assumptions still carry life and which no longer serve.
- **Financial Questions:**
 - What financial models do these communities use (memberships, subscriptions, space rentals, mutual aid, grants)?
 - Where are the similarities and differences?
- **Homework:** Reflect on the “desire paths” you visited. What kinds of resilience did you observe – spiritual, emotional, physical, economic, environmental, relational, intergenerational, cultural, etc.? What was missing?

12/3: Repurposing & Reimagining Assets

Theme: Buildings, money, and power as tools for justice

- **Anchor Readings:**
 - Mark Elsdon, *We Aren't Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry* (Eerdmans, 2021).
 - Partners for Sacred Places, *Sacred Places at Risk: New Evidence on the Value of Religious Properties* ([publications page](#)).
- **Practice:**
 - Brainstorm how FCCUCC's building could embody multiple justice-centered identities (worship community, resilience hub, Queer/Trans Center, food and housing support, pollinator gardens, etc.).
 - Sketch 2–3 broad prototypes (not detailed budgets yet).
- **Homework:** prepare for 12/17 Equity Audit by reflecting on these questions
 - Guiding Questions:
 - Who is shaping the vision? Whose experiences are absent?
 - Who benefits or might be excluded by current ideas?
 - How are decisions shared?
 - What spiritual practices keep equity alive in our work?
 - What voices must we invite before finalizing our proposal?
 - Think about one or two people from the “neighborhood” that you want to dream with about the Hub.

12/17: Centering Justice, Inclusion & Future Leadership

Theme: Whose voices shape the hub? Ministry for the neighbors or by and with the neighbors?

- **Anchor Readings:** Pick one to report on
 - Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter* (Orbis, 2021).
 - Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Orbis, 1996) [excerpts].
 - Fetzer Institute, *Sharing Spiritual Heritage* ([program reports and stories](#)).
- **Practice:**
 - Reflect on the Dec 3 homework.
 - Conduct a conversational Equity Audit using those guiding questions.

- Identify 3–4 key insights and 2–3 concrete equity commitments that will shape the Hub proposal.
- Refine and record the draft Hub concept: vision, justice focus, programs, partners, and next steps.
- Confirm which community voices to invite into January’s dreaming and feedback process.
- **Output**
 - Equity Reflection Summary for publication (1 page)
 - Draft Hub Concept Document for refinement and presentation in January

1/7/26: Synthesis and draft report

Theme: Drawing the threads together

- **Practice**
 - Review and finalize the Justice-Focused Resilience Hub Concept.
 - Integrate all learning, equity reflections, and sustainability sketches.
 - Identify follow-up work with CB&LF:
 - Building assessment and capital planning (to begin post-approval).
 - Stewardship and campaign coaching.
 - Congregational engagement and communication tools.
 - Decide whether to join an entrepreneurial faith cohort for ongoing innovation and peer learning.

Next Steps

- **Mid-January:** Present draft concept and Equity Reflection Summary to Council.
- **Feb 1 2026:** Congregational presentation and discernment at the Annual Meeting with possible “equity audit” activity.
- **Spring 2026:** Engage CB&LF for building/financial assessment and next-phase planning.

Bibliography

Spiritual Infrastructure Theory

- Sue Phillips, “*The Spiritual Infrastructure of the Future*,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* (2020).
- Susan Leigh Star, “*The Ethnography of Infrastructure*,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 377–391.
- Wendy Cadge, Grace Yukich, and others, *Religion on the Edge: De-centering and Re-centering the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Contextual Justice Work

- Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Orbis Books, 1971; rev. 1988).
- Kelly Brown Douglas, *Resurrection Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter* (Orbis Books, 2021).
- Ada María Isasi-Díaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-First Century* (Orbis Books, 1996).
- James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Orbis Books, 1975; rev. 1997).

Financial Sustainability Models

- Mark Elsdon, *We Aren’t Broke: Uncovering Hidden Resources for Mission and Ministry* (Eerdmans, 2021).
- Partners for Sacred Places, *Sacred Places at Risk: New Evidence on the Value of Religious Properties* (1998, updated case studies at sacredplaces.org).
- Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *Future Faith: Ten Challenges Reshaping Christianity in the 21st Century* (Fortress Press, 2018).

Additional Citations on Infrastructure & Desire Paths

- Angie Thurston & Casper ter Kuile, *How We Gather* (Harvard Divinity School, 2015).
- Casper ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual* (HarperOne, 2020).