

Strategic Plan

draft 4 for C3 2024 11 05

The goal of this plan is to enable C3 West Michigan's Inclusive Spiritual Connection to create more C3 in the world.

More C3? More C3 members, of course. Also:

- more C3 community events like potlucks, interest groups, drop-in sessions
- more C3-hosted events in addition to Sunday Gatherings to welcome people from within the Tri-Cities and around West Michigan to experience our approach to the spiritual life
- more C3 programming, bringing national and international spiritual teachers and practitioners to West Michigan for C3 and public events

The precipitating events leading to the development of this plan were the stresses in 2023 surrounding C3's continued use of space at Central Park Place, including the friction inherent in sharing the space on Sundays with a theologically conservative church, the unrelated resignation of C3's Lead Teacher Kent Dobson to move out of state, and the subsequent decision by Central Park Place to stop allowing long-term scheduling by organizations of CPP rooms on weekends (as they developed their own plan to focus on higher-revenue weekend uses by weddings, a plan which has not changed in response to Life Church's departure). In response to these events, the Board of Trustees hired an Executive Director and new Lead Teacher to refocus C3 on future action.

C3 has until the middle of 2026 to locate a new place for Sunday Gatherings. This plan was developed to focus attention on that need.

Plan Development and Grounding

This plan was developed as an outgrowth of prior planning exercises, including the review in 2015 of a community in transition when Ian Lawton returned to Australia, the Surviving to Thriving initiative of 2019, the Just Cause process of 2022, the community conversations in 2023 concerning our use of Central Park Place, and Board of Trustees conversations in 2023 leading to a restructured Lead Teacher role and new Executive Director role. We held a community meeting in April of 2024, and we held focus team meetings in the spring and summer of 2024 (location, growth, and funding).

In the past decade and a half C3 has regularly approached questions of its self-identity; its place in the world; who will join the community; what its name should be; what is its relationship with religious organizations, trappings, language are; and other, similarly inward-focused questions. These are good and important conversations to have from time to time, but this planning process treated them as settled questions for now. For example, "spiritual" is a word C3 has struggled with, and also with the question "does using the word *spiritual* convey a message to

those who might join us but have a resistance to that word that they would encounter too much woo-woo?" This plan uses the word "spiritual" a lot, and uses it to convey the full range of meanings and connotations that word carries—everything from the traditional religion-inflected meanings that cause trouble to the material meanings of "breath" and "character, disposition, vigor". Neither C3 historically, nor this plan specifically, require members' assent on an exact or exclusive meaning of "spirit" or "spiritual." We contain multitudes, we like it that way, and as we implement this plan, we should keep that in mind.

At the same time as wrestling with questions of identity, the community has also continued its outward-facing practices of involvement with the local area and the world community. C3's involvement with the international Charter for Compassion bears fruit every month through Week 3 at C3. C3 participates in annual celebrations of the diversity and inherent worth of the world through involvement such as Earth Day celebration, Pride month, and the Hispanic Heritage Fiesta. We have a crew who does highway clean ups. We have people who Stand for Peace weekly.

These activities demonstrate C3's history of self-organized action in the world, and this self-organizing energy also created our central activity, the Sunday Gathering. It also creates community-building initiatives such as Dine with Nine, book club, affinity groups of women and men, and nature walks. Many of these activities happen in locations across the community. Through events like these, our community lives its values as organic expressions of the spiritual community and spiritual connections C3 is both vessel for and embodied expression of.

Our volunteer base is strong, and our culture of self-organized action is healthy. It is also stretched almost to its limit. During the period this plan was developed, the Executive Director, in consultation with the Board of Trustees and Lead Teacher, restructured the set-up and tear-down of our gathering space at Central Park Place. Many community members stepped in to make sure the tasks continue to happen on Sundays, but in doing so, we observed that our membership and volunteers are handling just about everything they can.

This brief review of our recent history highlights some of our most pressing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats.

- Strengths: resilience in the face of great external pressures, and in response to internal changes; volunteer action; a questioning and seeking attitude when problem-solving, and creating programming; C3 has a history since 2012 of balanced budgets and occasional surpluses
- Weaknesses: a volunteer base stretched nearly to its limits; since 2018 we have seen a decline in giving members from 146 to 128; stale programming
- Threats: uncertainty about a location for C3's central offering, the Sunday Gathering; declining membership trend augers potential financial instability; theocratic intolerance
- Opportunities: a new location create openings to consolidate activities in a permanent, centralize home; new executive leaders on staff create openings for easing demands on volunteers; existing financial resources allow C3 to invest in actions to leverage

strengths and opportunities while mitigating the immediate stresses of weaknesses and threats

This plan was developed with the following, previously adopted, community statements in mind:

We are a local West Michigan community formed of many perspectives, spiritual and secular, exploring what it means to be fully human, wrestling with meaning, and working together toward a better life.

Our Just Cause statement

C3 inspires spiritual, intellectual, and creative exploration and action, led by the questions, “what are the biggest challenges we face on our shared journey, and how do we respond to those challenges?”

Our Shared Values

Rather than doctrine or dogma, we gather around shared values, which both inform who we are, and what we aspire to be.

Our Community evolves and grows by:

- Welcoming all who share our vision, regardless of their path through life
- Encouraging and supporting the exchange of ideas as a means of personal growth
- Taking responsibility for our actions in the Community and the world
- Accepting one another unconditionally
- Participating in the life of the Community
- Honoring the dignity of every individual, and
- Promoting our mission, vision, and values through our activities in our local communities

We engage the greater community by:

- Participating in social justice programs, projects, and education
- Supporting programs and initiatives to create diverse, integrated communities
- Encouraging civil discourse and learning with interested citizens on issues of importance for the local communities
- Acting to ensure a sustainable natural and social environment, and
- Asserting that our common humanity is more important than any individual differences.

These values guide us, and challenge us to define and live a good life:

- **Common Humanity.** We respect the dignity and worth of every individual.
- **Diversity.** We affirm all people and embrace all genders, sexual orientations, and ethnicities.
- **Open Inquiry.** We pursue the free exchange of ideas, explore the lessons of science, philosophy, and the creative arts, and undertake independent spiritual journeys.

- **Compassionate Action.** We strive to safeguard and extend human rights, peace, and social justice, locally and globally, as individuals and jointly with others.
- **Environmental Sustainability.** We care for our Earth home with mindfulness and responsibility for ourselves and for future generations.
- **Well-Being.** We promote wholeness and wellness of mind, body, and spirit, recognizing our self responsibility, inter-relatedness, and interdependence.

Long-term growth

C3 Spiritual Community will seek to welcome all comers into the spiritual community. This welcome will embrace people seeking to deconstruct their relationships with the faith and/or spiritual traditions of their past, those who have never had a spiritual tradition, those whose tradition has always been central to their spiritual path but have no local community for their practice, and others. We will provide this through the community that naturally grows from the continual practice of conversation and fellowship at Sunday Gathering, through intentional development of internal programming and staffing decisions that challenge the organization to widen the welcoming circle, and through actively seeking out opportunities for conversation and programming with other communities of faith and/or spiritual traditions as well as with other organizations that foster interfaith, ecumenical, and secular values-based activity with spiritual, rather than political or commercial, stances.

The Sunday Gathering will remain the central offering of C3. C3's unique presence in the world is the "conversation as spiritual practice" we offer. Every week we gather for several hours in community to encounter wisdom traditions, hear perspectives on matters of ultimate concern (as Paul Tillich puts it), and deeply engage in conversation with people and wrestle with how these encounters affect our spiritual lives. Our name includes the phrase "spiritual connection," and the connections we make—person to person, and with ideas and perspectives not our own—are what build our spiritual community. We grow as individuals, and our community is strengthened, when we widen our circle, include more voices, and honor more traditions. The Sunday Gathering is what makes more C3 possible, and the elements of this plan should always keep the structure and emergent community of Sunday Gathering in mind.

C3 will use the talents and skills of our paid staff to execute plans by coordinating volunteer teams to fully embody the community's vision expressed in this plan. In 2023 the Board of Trustees decided to hire a full-time Executive Director and change the role of Lead Teacher to a full-time position, and shift its focus from being a "working board" to being a "governing board." With these changes in leadership structure and purpose, C3 can be said to be developing a "member owned/community driven/professionally led" model of operations. This plan recognizes these additions to the C3 structure, and leans heavily on the idea of staff leadership to encourage and support member-volunteers to make this community vision happen.

C3 will maintain financial responsibility, seek to minimize costs, and hold sufficient funds in reserve to maintain the physical space we occupy for the comfort and accessibility of all

community members, as well as to seize unforeseen opportunities to be more C3. The space will cost more than our use of Central Park Place has cost, and the plan addresses this.

The following timeline is intended to indicate a rough order of tasks and activities to allow C3 to move forward with intention, and to lay groundwork to build on successes. It is not a "one step at a time" checklist, and several of these tasks will be in process at the same time, and we should expect a regular pattern of assessment, refinement, and fresh takes on them as accomplishments open new opportunities. The cadence for these reviews will depend on the scope and timeline of each individual project, and each project will include development of a timeline and report frequency in its first few steps.

Crucially, as C3 grows we should expect new members to join the Community, and we need to be ready to bring their voices and passions into our programming while maintaining a steady respect for our mission and values.

Timeline

2025

- The Executive Director will assemble a location search team consisting of representation from the Board of Trustees, members of the Community, and such outside professionals as necessary to secure a location. We will seek and occupy a space of at least 6000 square feet in the approximate Tri-Cities area. This space will hold up to 200 people for the Sunday Gathering, have a dedicated children's programming space, and additional meeting space for smaller groups which will include the C3 office needs and a kitchen area sufficient to sustain Small Bites and similar-scaled buffets.
- The recent bequest will be placed in a certificate of deposit while the Board of Trustees, advised by the Finance Committee and Executive Director determine the most responsible use of these funds.
- C3 will develop a fund-raising (ordinary operational) and fund-development (long-range resource growth) team, which will recognize the difference between the two activities, and create complementary processes to achieve both objectives. The Executive Director will be the primary driver of this team, and it will begin as a function of the Finance Committee.
- C3 will undertake a capital campaign needs assessment. The Executive Director, Board of Trustees, and member-volunteers will assess the costs of a move, and the funding target of the campaign.
- The Lead Teacher and community will undertake Sunday Gathering design to create an experience with an eye toward increasing average weekly attendance to 150 individuals, and increasing overall membership to a level that will sustain that attendance goal.
- The Executive Director will work with community life committees to ensure life transitions of members and friends are properly honored.

2025-2026

- Under the leadership of the Executive Director and Lead Teacher, the Board of Trustees and Community will assess the existing committee structure, and recommend any adjustments to most smoothly achieve the current activities of the Community, and build a framework for future activities as identified by future membership. This may include changes to the bylaws and standing Committee structure.
- Under the leadership of the Executive Director and Lead Teacher, C3 will review its public-facing materials, brand identity standards, and develop or hire for development and implement a marketing program.
- C3 has an existing policy entitled "Community Crisis Fund." The Executive Director and Finance Committee will review this program, and take necessary steps to fund it at an appropriate level and ensure the appropriate staff and volunteer committees have an understanding of its purposes and processes.
- The Executive Director and C3 community will create a facilities management committee, initially as a subcommittee of the Finance Committee, to assist in both property use and to ensure funds for property maintenance are stewarded for long-term maintenance and on-going expenses. Such a committee will be necessary in almost any scenario when C3 relocates. In the event the community enters into a leasing contract, it is likely we will be responsible for triple-net expenses such as utilities, maintaining our own equipment and furnishings, and common area maintenance. In the unlikely event of purchase, such expenses would only increase. While day-to-day facilities maintenance will fall to the Executive Director's management, a subcommittee of the Finance Committee is the best home for long-range oversight and community accountability, at least until a regular cadence of maintenance is understood.
- The Executive Director will seek out and book additional opportunities to use the space resources of the new location to generate additional revenue or provide a "staging area" for public good use of the space such as blood drives or "service fairs" where people can learn more about regional or community resources. Such "subletting" will be consistent with lease terms, local regulation, and be undertaken in coordination with advice from our accountants to maintain compliance with IRS standards.
- Through the leadership of the Executive Director and Lead Teacher, the C3 community will begin scheduling non-Sunday Gathering events open to the wider Tri-Cities and West Michigan community to enter into fuller dialogue with as wide a range of people and spiritual stances as we can reach.
- In addition to the non-Sunday Gathering events, the Executive Director and Lead Teacher will develop a "convention protocol" to allow C3 to create larger events and lecture-series programming to facilitate the growth of larger networks of people and organizations aligned with our values, highlighting our spiritual focus, and honoring a pluralistic appreciation for ways of meaning. This programming will be intentionally designed to be financially self-sustaining, with an additional goal of increasing C3's financial resources.

- Coordinating with the Executive Director and Lead Teacher, the Education Committee will review children's programming, and develop updated planning in anticipation of greater demand resulting from growth in Sunday attendance and membership.

2026-2027

- C3 will review the opportunity to hire an additional Teaching staff member who will bring under-represented demographic and spiritual perspectives into the organization's formal structures, programming, and planning. This will be distinct from the program of Core Teachers and Guest Teachers, and may require some adjustments to the process of booking Sunday Gathering teachers. The intent with this possible new staff member is not to eliminate the necessity for outside voices and spiritual perspectives, but rather to expand and challenge the organization's internal perspectives, and accountability to our values of inclusion.
- C3 will undertake a review of this strategic plan, consult with stakeholders, and develop a revised three year plan building on the outcomes of the current plan.