

December First Sunday Town Hall

On December 1st, the Board held its first “First Sunday Town Hall.” Held immediately after service with a soup and bread lunch served by the Board, we had a total of 45* members, friends, and visitors stay and participate in our Town Hall discussion. This month, we held a series of three discussions on the Board’s three annual goals: focus on spiritual deepening within the congregation, including the creation of a pastoral care program; modernize Sunday services; and renewal of our Welcoming Congregation designation, including inclusive bathrooms. Below is a summary of these conversations.

Goal 1: Focus on spiritual deepening within the congregation, including the creation of a pastoral care program

Congregants shared the breadth of where they personally find spiritual deepening (worship, music, nature and/or gardening, meditation, connection with others, service to others) and how UUFG has helped them with spiritual deepening (services, sermons, connections with others). The discussions reflected the understanding that the UUFG community is part of that spiritual path.

Worship, Small Groups, Connection with Others

Recognizing that worship was a place where many have experienced spiritual deepening and it is one of the ways the Fellowship helps people with that, there were discussions on how the Fellowship can offer more diverse worship opportunities. Suggestions included having services at different times, on different days of the week, and with different intentions. There was a sense that as long as the main service remained as an anchor, offering evening vespers, earlier services, interfaith services (i.e. Seder), and/or less frequent alternate worship options would be supported. Congregants want to identify ways to create a spiritual space in community.

Small group worship opportunities that focus on a particular path of spiritual deepening – music, nature, meditation, etc. – were also suggested. Music and meditation opportunities like a drumming circle, singing/chanting meditation, and other meditation forms were mentioned. Nature-based, outdoor services, congregation-wide labyrinth walk, and other outdoor activities would appeal to those who find spiritual deepening in nature. Other communal groups like Interweave (LGBTQIA+ group), CUUPS (UU Pagans), and similar were also mentioned. Overall, there was support for offering a wider variety of activities after church and throughout the week. Concern was shared over transportation issues for members without vehicles or who have difficulty with night driving.

Opportunities to deepen understanding and offer opportunities for discussion was very briefly touched on. Ideas of using the UUA Common Read (this year it is *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States* by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz) or having a pre-service discussion group were also shared.

Interestingly, discussion of spiritual deepening in relationship to adult religious education was not a strong conversation point.

Children and Youth

How we support our children and youth in their own spiritual deepening was a topic of conversation. Congregants expressed a desire to have more youth involvement in all aspects of church life, including through music, outreach, and leading at least one service a year. All children should be welcomed to participate in the interactive joys and concerns (dropping of stones) to feel connected to the service and community. A goal of each child having a relationship with at least 6 people in the congregation was

shared, and the need for childcare for parents to participate in events and small group offerings was recognized.

Pastoral Care

The common themes in the discussion on pastoral care are that it is an area of church life that needs more attention, we are underresourced to meet pastoral care needs, and there is discomfort both in asking for and providing pastoral care. Part of the cycle is the size of the congregation – we are no longer small enough that everyone knows everyone else and lack the established structures and staffing of larger churches. Lack of personal connection and/or history are clear barriers to pastoral care both to providing care and to knowing when care is needed. Also with insufficient responsiveness, fewer congregants feel comfortable being vulnerable to ask for help, and our systems in place for asking (News and Needs email listserv) are inadequate.

Many shared the belief that everyone should be involved in pastoral care within the congregation, recognizing that burn-out and the burden of care should not be on a few members. There was positive energy that this is a good time to re-envision and re-energize pastoral care efforts. Mentorship on how to help in difficult situations, or pastoral care pairings of long-term members with newer members, could increase comfort in responding to calls for assistance. These kinds of cultural changes will need constant attention and discussion.

As far as potential ways we can increase our pastoral care of each other, there were great suggestions shared. Some of the suggestions were: having a ride-sharing program or church bus to drive elderly to programs available at night and Sunday services; increasing congregation-wide communication (phone tree, email, etc.) of needs and/or joys and sorrows; care packages to young adults; increased childcare, including a co-op childcare system; and an internal Facebook group for communication (as opposed to our Facebook page). More small groups and religious education would increase opportunities for congregants to get to know each other.

Clearly, much work needs to happen to culturally shift the congregation's current model of pastoral caring. Part of that work will be setting a clear vision and supporting the necessary changes to implement it.

Goal 2: Modernize Sunday services

As technology continues to develop and improve, the ways in which worship and congregational life can be enhanced by that technology increase. Our discussion on modernizing Sunday services included feeling the pulse of the congregation on some potential upcoming changes and also to hear what else modernizing might mean. Several topics were expected, including more ways to electronically pay pledges and make electronic plate offerings (Venmo, PayPal, etc.), and hiring a professional sound operator to decrease volunteer stress and improve sound consistency. Overall, there was a feeling of modernize, but not too quickly.

Visual Space

Over the past year or two, we have had visual projections to enhance the service with words for the hymns, pictures from the Story for All Ages, etc. Overall, congregants enjoy having this added to services, sharing that services feel more engaging with people able to look up for hymn words, and also recognize that the current set-up isn't ideal – its current location isn't ideally visible and the minister

should not have to be responsible for advancing slides. Potential future uses include removing the need for an order of service and providing “questions for thought” after services.

Discussion of where the ideal location for a permanent screen or screens considered long-term impacts and visibility, and often were in direct contradiction of each other. Suggestions for screen locations included using two screens (with and without moving the piano), permanent screen placed higher on its current location, retractable center screen (that is down throughout service with projected symbols or that is rolled down for part of service), no screen but a specially painted wall, etc.

The source of the greatest anxiety was around the potential for changing the location of the UUFG symbols to accommodate a permanent central screen, the place in the Sanctuary that would allow the largest centrally focused screen installation. Although moving the symbols was preferred by some congregants and an indifferent proposition to others, for many it caused upset or even threats of leaving the congregation. Commonly cited reasons for this anxiety included concern over the aesthetics, the history behind the symbols (the symbols were in old building but had been lost, and member Paul Larkin made the new ones), its role in our congregational identity, and its diversity symbolism – the unspoken message that whatever your belief you are welcome. More consideration of technical solutions and continued conversations with the congregation will be critical to moving forward here.

Beyond the use of a screen or screens, other discussion was about the Sanctuary space in general. Advocates for moving the pulpit, rearranging the seating, adding focused lighting of speaker, moving the choir, moving the piano, etc. sharing ideas. Overall, there was much more openness to change to these parts of the visual space.

Podcast, Livestreaming, etc.

In general, congregants support podcasting and/or livestreaming services and recognize that this can support traveling members and/or members who can't be here on Sunday for one reason or another. Concerns were of a more technical nature: we would need an IT person to make these available, there are costs associated with livecasting, we need to consider music licensing requirements, and we need to be ADA compliant (video will need transcribing). There were some requests for sermon transcripts contemporaneously with Sunday service, as a way to assist hard of hearing members and for livestreaming. A major concern for livestreaming was the limitations of our current internet service.

Overall Communications

Modernizing Sunday discussion also included UUFG's overall communications and how we get our message out there. Multiple communications avenues will need to be used consistently to reach all generations who communicate in different ways: Instagram, Facebook, email, in person, Twitter, cell, text, Remind, etc. In addition, ways in which we share information – Google Drive, Evite, etc. have barriers to some members. Members who aren't familiar or comfortable using electronic communication channels expressed concern about being included, which emphasizes how all communication must use multiple paths simultaneously.

Other

Other modernizing ideas included looking at the time of service (or not!), considering more contemporary music, and addressing transportation needs for elderly and students alike.

Goal 3: Renewal of our Welcoming Congregation designation, including inclusive bathrooms

Although the Welcoming Congregation designation has typically been focused on LGBTQIA+ and has specific milestones to complete each year to renew, we wanted to go deeper and ask the congregation questions about what Welcoming means to them, what it means to the congregation, and what it means to our community. Overall, what emerged was that the word Welcoming means how we connect with each other and how we interact with the greater community.

Interacting with the Greater Community

A large part of our being Welcoming is directed towards those who aren't here yet. Improving our own visibility and presenting a clearer message of who we are was a great topic of conversation. Several ideas were floated about ways to make technical changes that might have an impact, including improving our road-side visibility and messaging through: updating/replacing our street sign ("Wayside Pulpit"), adding flags/banners that represent our inclusive message, improving campus visibility from the road with judicious grounds maintenance and clearing, and addressing building maintenance needs to improve external appearance.

Spreading awareness through advertising – particularly in publications and venues that may reach marginalized communities – was also suggested, although there was an awareness that there is a cost associated with that. Overall, an improvement in our public relations work (press releases, articles, brochures, website, etc.) was seen as a technical change that could positively impact UUFG's visibility in the greater community.

The area where the most congregation-wide work is needed – direct action and interaction – also sparked some great ideas including more community involvement (like we had for the Women's March), improving our outreach at events and fairs with more interactive outreach booth and additional volunteers there to engage, and inviting the community into our events. Additional ideas are getting guest speakers out to the press and collaborate more with other churches.

It was clear in the discussions that this outwardly focused Welcoming is intended to extend beyond the LGBTQIA community, but we openly recognize that we will need to increase our outreach and learn how to better engage to attract more families and more people of color. Here was an area where the congregation wants to "dream big," but doesn't yet have the tools to move forward.

Connecting Within

When discussions redirected to focus inward – on how UUFG does at Welcoming those who are already here – there was an understanding that the goal is "radical hospitality." There was behavioral awareness of the things we as congregants do well (greeting, the Welcome Table) and what we all need to consciously strive to improve.

Some specific issues for which there may be technical fixes include improving bathrooms for accessibility, improving overall congregational accessibility, and divergent needs during coffee hour (sound, mobility, etc.). Increased member involvement in service to promote deeper community and greater visible congregational diversity is another relatively clear improvement.

Among the concerns voiced was the paucity of follow-up after service with visitors and newer members by congregation at large – that connection piece that transforms visitors into members into volunteers.

Although the simple solution is to have it be everyone's responsibility, this will require deeper and more thoughtful cultural changes within the congregation. One of the shared suggestions was having discussion topics after service to promote interaction and discussion.

The second widely shared concern was how welcoming we are to parents and children. Several members shared their experiences of how we could improve our welcoming to families: children's hospitality table, changing how parents are given options for where they and their child can be during service, and continue to normalize children in service, including their noise. Concerns about the impact of child noises on hard of hearing congregants was raised.

Welcoming within discussions often centered around needs and connection, which dovetail with our pastoral care needs. There is a lot of energy needed to address the concerns here while maintaining focus on Welcoming as a whole. Additional discussion, education, and listening is needed amongst congregants.

Inclusive Bathrooms

Part of the greater discussion of Welcoming in our congregation focused on our current bathrooms. In the Sanctuary building, there are two gender-designated bathrooms with a sign that hangs between the two stating that you may use the bathroom that makes you most comfortable. The administration building has a single stall unisex toilet. There are also two larger gender-designated bathrooms that each have a shower in the classroom wing.

Among the three groups, there was wide range of feelings regarding changing the bathrooms. Although there was a general sense that making a change to be more inclusive was supported, there was strong anxiety present around the potential of changing all the bathroom signs to unisex. Discussion about designating certain restrooms as unisex while keeping gender-designated toilets in other places brought up concerns of segregation, convenience, etc.

Structural changes that address both the anxiety and concerns listed above were advocated for, including: making individual self-contained toilet stalls (floor to ceiling) and removing all urinals; adding a single unisex family bathroom wherever there are gender-designated bathrooms; and converting the bathrooms to several single person bathrooms, each handicapped accessible with its own sink and lock. Several of these structural changes will require consulting with an architect and will require fundraising.

Whatever changes we make, we will need to keep the conversation open and keep hearing the concerns and addressing the anxiety.

Attendees were: Mary Anthony, Joy Avery, Paul Avery, Pam Bramdes, Aaron Broadwell, Judy Bruce-Mangle, Dotty Burnham, Leslie Chase, Susan Christy, Rose Cole, Rosemarie Dinklage, Jeff Dunn, Tamara Evonne, Rebecca Falmlen, Beverly Giordano, Diana Hagan, Warren Hodge, Lynn Jameson, Fred Judkins, Judith Kendall, Michaelyn Luttge, Debby Jo Malickson, Harry Mangle, Peter Marino, Heather McAuslane, Joann Mossa, Barbara Palmer, Tom Palmer, Erin Parish, Samara Powers, Alice Primack, Beverly Sanders, Zoharah Simmons, Jeff Stevens, Kristin Stevens, Liz Stewart, Olivia Stryker, Julie Talry, Barbara Thomas, Sandra Topp, Pete Turner, Joe Ukeiley, Katie VanHoose, Mike Wagner, and Dave Wilkomm

Respectfully submitted by Kristin Stevens, President