

2020 January First Sunday Town Hall

Our January First Sunday Town Hall discussed our congregational goals of Spiritual Deepening, Modernizing Sundays, and Welcoming Renewal within the framework of congregational social justice. Thirty-three congregants attended and several topics emerged during the conversations: social justice as spiritual work, congregational engagement in social justice activities, community visibility of our social justice work, worship as a social justice opportunity, the Share the Plate program, Welcoming Congregations, and inclusive bathrooms.

At the end of the meeting, we asked participants what they heard from someone else during the Town Hall that they thought was meaningful and should be shared, and we heard the following:

- Hear more from people who are affected by the various topics we might be talking about.
- Having music that is related to social justice in the service.
- We need to use the internet better so that people can church shop more easily and find us.
- When hiring folks to do work for the fellowship, make sure to think about minorities.
- Noted that conversations in the groups were respectful and compassionate.
- Our country is very divided politically and we should be open to people of different political persuasions.

February's First Sunday Town Hall will be a potluck.

Social Justice as Spiritual Work

Overall, the sense was that this is an internal process, that each of us must decide on how and in what way social justice work deepens our personal and/or spiritual growth. There was a general agreement that being kind to others, caring for others, was a core aspect of that meaning and growth. At the same time, there were concerns that we focus too quickly on what we can do for others more than listening to and just being with others.

Repeatedly, reference to our interconnectedness in the greater community, our being in this together, was the overriding sentiment about how we increase our own spiritual meaning of our social justice work. Equally discussed was the importance of us going into the community and forming connections and listening to people. As one member described it, "We value our nodes (activities) but are less aware of the connections (the people). We need to appreciate and recognize the nodes and the connections." Reflecting on "are we doing social justice for us or for others?" as a group and cultivating mindfulness that "we can't do it all or alone" was also suggested to keep us grounded and focused.

Some ideas of how the congregation can support that include:

- Focused involvement in the community, centered on common goals and beliefs. (More inter-faith work.)
- Examine the difference between social justice and social service, where justice is trying to change the systems and service is helping people who are negatively impacted.
- Clear preparation time before a congregational social justice activity. Why do we do what we do? How does this reflect our values and further our mission?

- Dedicated communal reflection time after a congregational social justice activity. Is it making a difference? How do we feel having been a part of it? Reflect with partners or target audience/recipients.

Congregational Engagement in Social Justice Activities

There was varied conversations about congregational engagement in our social justice activities, ranging from discussion of individual needs (child care, more advanced notice, increased communication, etc.) to discussion of how much there is to do and how little we can do when we are working on it all. There were several calls, at different times throughout the Town Hall discussions, where the concern that we spread ourselves too thin or try to do too much at once was raised. Anxiety around the amount of social justice work we try to do but don't have deep congregational involvement in was expressed as frustration, concern, and determination. Choosing a singular focus was a recurrent suggestion, both individually and for the whole congregation, particularly if the congregation wants to make a stronger impact in the community.

Some ideas of how the congregation can support that include:

- Offer child care during social justice events for families with children.
- Have a long-term calendar plan, offering plenty of notice for congregational social justice action.
- Increased and varied communication of upcoming social justice work and action.
- Hold a recurrent mid-week UUFG community night with dinner, discussion groups, meetings, social justice actions, etc.
- Have more consistent Sunday offerings for activities, including social justice events, with lunch to have Sunday be a UUFG community day.
- Offer workshop or classes to examine our spiritual gifts and/or what we are good at. Offer series of workshops on the principles and social justice. These could include a social justice inventory/interest survey.
- Coordinated congregation-wide discussion of congregational social justice focus and planning well in advance of implementation. (Conversations at all social events, planned Town Halls, worship services, etc.)
- Create realistic congregational social justice goals that are achievable, measurable, and with clear time limits (SMART goals).

Community Visibility of UUFG's Social Justice

There was energy around being more present in our community social justice work, and in making UUFG more visible in the community. Ideas included more frequent use of social media to share upcoming social justice (and other) events, inviting the greater community's involvement – specifically, using social media notifications, Facebook likes, shared calendars and events. There was a request for a training workshop on social media venues to make use of these communication channels. Coordination of efforts so that we are more vocal and visible in what we do was also brought up as a way for the community to see who we are and what we stand for. Our social justice work is one of the things that can attract people to come to UUFG – as an external embodiment of our UU principles, “People respond to what we see.”

Worship as a Social Justice Opportunity

Since Sunday worship is the time with the majority of our congregation comes together, it is also a great opportunity for us to live our values in a visible way. Providing opportunities for marginalized members – and guest speakers – to participate as part of the worship service in ways that aren't limited to their identities was raised by several members. At the same time, hearing from someone (or several someones) who is directly affected by the topic of a social justice-centered service was also supported.

There were many worship ideas shared: experiential learning during a service (such as blindfolds and earmuffs to simulate vision and hearing disabilities, etc.); reaching in to our congregation to collect and share (anonymous) personal concerns (i.e. hungry, homeless, struggling with addiction, domestic violence, other precarious position, etc.) to let the community know that we may have these needs within our community, to personalize these issues; having a small group discussion-centered service surrounded with other service ritual elements; “talkback” after service for service-related discussion and processing, with childcare.

Additionally, technological changes were discussed. With good internet, we could begin by streaming the service, so those who cannot come can see it “live.” Additionally, we would be able to allow remote guests could participate and perhaps see remote participants on a screen in “virtual pews.” Beyond reaching members, there were discussions of having a radio broadcast, or other kind of external sharing like a live service via cable service or radio. Having some kind of show like that once a quarter or similar, it could share UU to those who doesn't know what UU is.

UUFG's Share the Plate Program

On the whole, the participants were satisfied with the current Share the Plate program. Some suggestions we made to update the method of contributions (offer way to digitally contribute), change the frequency of funds collection (making whole month making undesignated portion; or percentage of whole month), or change the type of funds collection (organizations get all loose change for the month). Others offered ideas for different ways to get potential recipient names (maybe decide quarterly; have tables about those organizations before the vote – then select four for the year; use dot voting for selecting organizations). The last suggestion was to be strategic about support based on criteria: make a difference, fits our values, explain why chosen, how they use money, etc.; focus on the selected issue – money and action.

Welcoming Congregation

One of this year's goals is renewal of our Welcoming Congregation designation, but that doesn't mean that the congregation knows what that renewal requires. In addition, there was discussion about whether “Welcoming Congregation” was too limiting. When asked what a congregation where all were welcomed would look like, we heard that it would include the idea of radical hospitality. Our Welcome Table would reflect the diversity of our congregation, in terms of age, race, culture, etc. The members would have regular pointers on how to welcome newcomers, including what to and not to say (i.e. if they are a young person, don't assume they are a student; don't assume their political affiliation or gender identity). We should be welcoming to everyone including LGBT community, but others as well.

Other ways we would reflect a radically welcoming congregation would include opportunities for members to become more knowledgeable of other religions and cultures. Suggestions included: invite people of other faiths to speak at our pulpit; invite choirs from other churches sing in our services; have groups from our congregation visit other services in our community. We could also have a program focused on diversity such as: Spanish speaking service; less formal service (maybe a second service once weekly or once monthly that is informal); musical diversity in the service, i.e. guitar, gospel, etc. Other ways the congregation can live the values of Welcoming include making an effort to recruit minority owned businesses to do work around UUFG and working to be unbiased in our words and deeds.

Inclusive Bathrooms

At least one of the discussion groups revisited the conversation about the idea of moving UUFG to having gender-inclusive bathrooms. One participant noted that the two separate bathrooms in the main Sanctuary building currently have different disability/handicap modifications from each other. There is still anxiety around the idea of sharing restroom facilities. "My preference (as a woman) is not to use restroom facilities shared by men. I am not comfortable with that." There needs to be more dialogue about this in order to reach some consensus here at our Fellowship.