

Consulting Associate Minister's Annual Report 2009-2010

Congregational Retreat

Although I am admittedly closely identified with the retreat and therefore not very objective, I have spoken to many people about it, looked at the evaluations that we did which constituted about a 30% response, and had a wrap-up meeting with the Retreat Team to gain perspective. It is an understatement to say the retreat was a success. It was wildly so I think. People acted like UUC had been doing it for years. People came together to knit until the early morning hours, played poker, and enjoyed the many built amenities of Cedarkirk, and dealt with disappointment of the high river water preventing the canoe trip. The feedback from Cedarkirk about our group was that we took too much responsibility for things like picking-up after ourselves. At one point a staff member said to us: "Stop, let us do that, you go have fun." We did collect feedback on the weekend and learned several things that can be addressed for the future.

I hope that UUC will continue this event. Dale Neiman, Jenn Bouchie, and Pete Pensa want to continue with it for next year and Judy Wade will consult as needed. I think two more people on the team would be ideal to help them and to learn the ropes. I did too much but needed to. Someone will need to see to the overall registration, including taking in the money. Abhi can handle scholarship requests I am sure. The Fund Raising through the lunches and registration forms for scholarships should continue, and there are funds remaining. I also think the date, which was the second weekend in March is ideal. There were no bugs and the teens have finished their "FCAT" testing the week preceding the weekend. Next year this will be March 11-13. I would also strongly urge you returning to Cedarkirk. It is only 58 miles away and I think the facility and its staff are really good. From my research to find it, the options are very few. Further I would recommend that an attempt be made to expand the number of people participating by 25-30%, meaning going from a goal of 75 people to 100-110 people. Given the number of people that will be able to speak authoritatively about the retreat and the regrets and envy I have heard from people that could not go, I think this will be a reachable goal.

Religious Education

Although many are obviously disappointed about the budgetary disruptions, the changes do present an opportunity to solicit higher levels of commitment. Along with members of the current RE Committee, four new members of the committee have been recruited, which was done to increase the committee's capacity to support the program and the RE Coordinator. All of the new people understand this. One of my main goals, the most important to me really, is to make sure the RE Committee has a Retreat, 5-6 hours in length with either lunch or dinner included, with an experienced person facilitating the gathering, preferably someone with experience in Organizational Development or similar expertise.

I see the main purpose of this event would be to:

1. Get to know each other

2. Decide on what the role and responsibilities will be for the RE Committee for the next year or two, based on the understanding of what the RE Coordinator's responsibilities will be. Develop priorities for these.
3. Decide how these responsibilities will be accomplished, including both how the committee will structure its meetings to address them in a disciplined way and what will happen between meetings.

From what I can tell, UUC does not have a history of doing things like a Committee Retreat. I strongly encourage you to begin making sure this happens, especially with your most important committees.

All in all, I think things are going well in RE. Attendance has averaged 38 children, down a little from earlier in the year but Spring is always a challenge, and ten adults. There is a core of very dedicated families who particularly now see the value of the program and their participation in it. The energy on Sunday mornings in the RE spaces is really good. There are several children that have formed fast friendships with each other. As a whole, I think the RE constituency feels less isolated and that they understand they need to take more responsibility for getting better connected to the congregation.

UUC's Mission, Vision and Narrative

I know that many at UUC are frustrated that you have hit a plateau, especially regarding your yearly Stewardship Campaign, membership, and worship attendance.

I think one of the reasons for the plateau is a sense of mission. Why are you here? What do you want to do as a corporate entity? What is your ministry? What is your purpose? Coming to grips with these kinds of questions I believe will be important in terms of your strategic planning, but knowing what your purpose is will give you a spiritual lift and that is contagious. Please do not doubt yourselves about this. You can get there. Below is a link that gives you a sense of what I am talking about with the processes to help you get there.

http://managementhelp.org/plan_dec/str_plan/stmnts.htm

I believe it is very important that you also find a different narrative when you talk about yourself as a congregation. Emphasize your stories of courage and accomplishment. That kind of narrative will enliven you and the people coming to get to know you. You speak too much about your disappointments and upheavals. It happens. Get over it. People don't want to come to a religious community to hear that. They have the nightly news and the morning paper for that. They want to be inspired and lifted up. You have those stories. Talk to people like Janine Harvey.

"Responding to Bullying"

Several weeks ago Hal Sparks brought to my attention that one of our youth had been bullied because he said he was an atheist. I then learned that 3 or 4 more of our young people had similar experiences. When I mentioned this to Abhi he told me about a non-profit called *Community Tampa Bay* (CTB) that among their activities works in the public schools of Hillsborough and Pinellas Counties

around how to respond to bullying. After speaking with the staff there I arranged for them to be on our campus April 25th to do some work with our youth, their parents, and their Sunday Advisors to give them some tools to address and respond to bullying behavior.

As I listened to the discussion of the list of tools the facilitators developed with the youth, I realized that the list was not only one to address this social problem, it was a list that would help us as individuals and as an institution address many ills that keep people divided and estranged. Then I thought what if as a congregation we engaged CBT to work with us to enable us to be more effective in addressing personally and corporately such ills as racism, homophobia, sexism, ageism, classism to name just some of the ills we suffer with in our society?

I would suggest that a congregation immersed in building such skills combined with an engaging and enlivening mission and narrative would be very irresistible. Further, what an amazing way to support our youth and their parents!

Here is the list our youth and CTB worked with:

Steps to Respond

1. Be ready
2. Identify behavior
3. Appeal to higher principles
4. Set limits/boundaries
5. Find an Allie—be an Allie
6. Be vigilant, _____, _____

Programming for Adults

I would like to cast a new vision in how UUC thinks about what has been called “Adult Education” as I think things have changed enough in our culture that a new paradigm is required to meet the learning needs of adults. What I want to propose that Adult Education be replaced with what I call Adult Programs. To me Adult Education implies classes meeting weekly or monthly. I have noticed that many adults have a hard time committing to this kind of format for various reasons.

I am not saying that it is a format that should be scraped, but I want to suggest that a mixture of activities could be combined to create this thing I am calling Adult Programs. Some things are already in place that fit under Adult Programs: Covenant Groups, Open Issues Forum, and the book groups to name three.

I think there are at least two criteria that Adult Programs should try to achieve:

1. Stimulate curiosity, learning and growth
2. Promote people making new friends and deepening ongoing relationships

Institutionally this can strengthen people’s connection to UUC because of the emotional and intellectual stimulation and personal growth and spiritual deepening they will experience.

Into this varied mixture called Adult Programs envision these examples:

- Clubs or groups like Photography Club, Computer Club, Poetry Group, or Knitting Group—these have the additional potential of being multi-generational.
- Cultural Outings: Imagine organized daytime weekday group trips to an area museum, art or artifact, with lunch together. Guided Tours with a docent could sometimes be arranged. Perhaps two in the Fall and two in the Winter/Spring time frame.
- Saturday Daytrips: a variation on the above designed to include families. For example a trip to “Bok Tower Gardens” in Lake Wales. I am sure there are many other possibilities within an hour/hour & ½.
- Films: care is needed here because of screening rights but if done in an educational context, there are ways to do this without the cost being high. What I would envision here are films that are inspirational, topical, help people think about things more deeply, etc and can provoke discussion either in an intermission and/or after the screening. The thing about cinema (and live drama) is that it can be visceral and thus provoke feeling that cannot be reached by other forms like prose, poetry and even music.
- One-time events like a speaker on a topic of high interest to the congregation and the community.
- A Book Group that focuses in reading and discussing Liberal Theology and Religion.

I will stop but I think these illustrate the possibilities, and hopefully arouse you to see the potential. In terms of offering classes on certain topics, this would continue, but even here I think there is possibility for changes. While I think offerings could continue during the week at night, I think there is even more possibility of participation by trying to offer classes early on Sunday afternoon, 1:00-2:30 PM for example, especially if there a lunch provided some how (catered or a fundraising event) along with childcare. The goal here is to attract parents who will not come at night (even if we provide childcare) because they want their children in bed by about 9 PM, which is about when they would be getting home. This Sunday afternoon timing would also be more attractive for older members who find driving at night uncomfortable. Because there is a significant number of people that have a time consuming commute, they would be more likely to stay for awhile longer on Sundays rather than come back during the week. Maybe this begins as a once or twice a-month concept.

I am not suggesting that all of these things be tried at once, but that one or two be initiated to test the waters. For example I know there are many passionate photographers, so begin with getting this formed along with one of the excursion concepts perhaps. Monitor and support whatever is selected and if things are working, add something the next year.

Your Identity

I would strongly urge you to be more open and proud of who you are and to do that with obvious demonstrations of what you value and esteem. Currently as you walk from the parking lot to the Sanctuary (please start calling it that rather than

The Octagon) people do not see anything that tells them they are approaching a religious institution nor do you see anything that trumpets your identity or what you think is important. Once in the foyer again, there is not symbol or manifestation of who you are and what you represent that is obvious and dramatic. The same is true in the Sanctuary except for the Chalice.

What I suggesting, pleading really, is that you use fabric hangings, banners, sculpture, and the like to communicate who you are and what you care about. Right now one could as easily think they are walking into a community center, concert hall or even a library. It is as if we are embarrassed to say to people “We do religion here.”

Start modestly if you must with a “Wayside Pulpit. If you do not know what this is, got to the UUA website and investigate. As you are investigating the various media to express who you are, look to other cultures to help you with these expressions—Asian, Hispanic, African (and African American) for example. This approach will communicate that you value diversity. Another way to do this is through your music. Continue and expand the diversity of music in worship. What about one Sunday a month being a “Rhythm Sunday?” Rhythmic music is a feature in most of the world. Don’t be bashful about bringing these various stylings into the service

Bashful: In general stop behaving this way. Unitarian Universalists have a life giving—life saving message. Be a congregation that is willing to embrace this truth and celebrate it.

UUC’s 60th Anniversary

The 2011-2012 Program Year will be the 60th Anniversary of this congregation. In addition to making this a big celebration, this would a good time to reflect on some of the things I have mentioned here and the changes and initiatives they speak to.

Conclusion

The prosperity—the success—of the Unitarian Universalist’s of Clearwater is solely in your hands. I hope in the weeks and months ahead you will find ways to elevate your commitment to this institution, one that makes so much of a difference in the lives of so many people.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Bill Welch