

Notes From the February 28, 2015 Town Hall Meeting

Close to 40 people gathered on a cold but sunny morning to discuss the governance and finances of USG and to explore ways to increase our membership. The day began with a worship service led by Reverend Kent and Reverend Daniel. After presentations on governance and strategic initiatives, the group broke into four breakout sessions: Welcoming and Engaging Membership led by Treva Burger, Church Finances led by Dennis Strain, Fundraising Opportunities led by Tom Ott, and Governance Structure led by Andrea Parry and Linda Brunn.

Welcoming and Engaging Membership generated a list of suggestions:

- An optimal data base would allow us to send targeted emails and keep track of level of engagement;
- Welcoming emails to visitors with web links so they can find more information in areas of interest rather than relying on committee chairs to reach out;
- Updated brochure, business card and/or special inserts to tell visitors who we are;
- Improve long term member engagement;
- Increase feeling of warmth/connection in the church;
- Think about resolving the pew problem, that items left for people to read about us generally get crumpled and torn;
- Share our good news (we do have a new social justice brochure that might meet this goal);
- Improve the narthex welcoming with wall colors, signs, information, things for kids, etc;
- Increase knowledge of the membership covenant (wallet card sent to people when they are serving the church or after making a pledge or taking an ASD class);
- Emphasize member engagement;
- De-emphasize joining (explain benefits of membership, but be vocal about the fact that we are happy to have engaged friends as well);
- Keep list of active friends (data base issue);
- Create pathway for good ideas to reach Programs and Events Council;
- Introduce the Transformation Team and the *Blind Spot* book to congregation;
- Improve institutional memory by documenting what has worked (and not worked) and making it available to new leaders;
- De-centralize Fellowship Hour (maybe mini coffee hour in Narthex and/or after service sermon conversations);
- Have ushers hand out cards to people wanting to share joys and concerns in the service (would be read by minister or service leader).

Church Finances drew a large crowd and a long discussion. The current budget is undergoing a mid-year correction - the Ministry Executive Team has identified some income shortfalls and is working with the committees to cut expenditures so that we remain within budget. For future budgets, the Board has mandated at least a 10% decrease in the deficit for each of the next three years. The first draft of next year's budget will be presented to the congregation for comment on March 22, giving the Board an opportunity to consider those comments before approving the final budget in April.

Staff expenses have increased over the past five years, due largely to increased hours and responsibilities for the administrative staff, increased healthcare costs, and increased cleaning costs from the heavy use of the building by rentals and church members.

Over the past four years, the General Endowment has had withdrawals of \$379,000, but has received \$322,000 in bequests. For the same period, the General Endowment has increased from \$721,000 to \$968,000, due to the increased value of the investments. Of the withdrawals, \$105,000 represents income allocated to the Operating Fund by Board policy; \$56,000 represents budget deficits; \$80,000 represents Sullivan Chapel construction loan payments; and \$113,000 represents emergency repairs to the building.

Comments from the breakout session included:

- Withdrawals from the General Endowment should not exceed income (estimated at 4% of the value of the fund averaged over three years);
- Withdrawals have deprived the fund of \$274,000 during a time of high investment returns;
- The current budget deficit of \$48,000 is not sustainable;
- The deficit could be eliminated by everyone increasing their pledge by \$20/month;
- Deficit spending to produce growth was contrasted with deficit spending once growth had leveled off; although recent membership growth has been flat, other measures of growth are up, including attendance, small group ministry, and involvement in programs, social justice and social service;
- Raising income from members, rentals, and special events should also be part of a budget reduction plan - in general, congregational giving is up and attendance is at the highest it has been in decades;
- Reducing the deficit by 10% each year for the next three years is not an adequate reduction plan;
- In considering reductions, UUA and JPD dues are optional each year, not a requirement comparable to paying our bills for services or goods;
- The new governance structure should help keep spending within the approved budget;
- The Board should address the deficit problem so that it can return to focus on more long term policies related to our mission;
- A bylaws change would allow the congregation to approve the budget.

Fundraising Opportunities included:

- Increasing opportunities for rentals with a wedding website, advertising for social gatherings and summer gatherings, and improvements in the appearance of our common halls;
- Developing a Legacy Program which encourages members to include USG in their wills;
- Encouraging members to increase their pledges by \$200/year to significantly reduce the deficit;
- Reinstigate the suggested giving grid to allow members to situate themselves along a fair share continuum;
- Given an improving economy, begin discussions about whether USG would like to engage in a capital campaign;
- To promote Unitarian Universalism, leave copies of UU World in doctor's and dentist's offices; and
- Target advertising for specific Services such as Day of the Dead and Kwanza as a way of drawing interest in USG.

The Governance Structure discussion raised a number of concerns:

- Confusion remains about what the Board does and what the Ministry Executive Team does;
- A primary role of the Board should be increasing pledge income;
- Board members need a yearly orientation to clearly define their roles;
- The MET seems too much like the boss;
- To avoid a self-perpetuating MET, it would be better to have the Nominating Committee solicit and coordinate the suggestions for candidates.