**Common Themes from Widening the Circle of Concern, 1st meeting on Theology chapter
 February 3, 2021**

Present: Treva Burger, Dev Howerton, Ryan Hurd, Sarah Frazier, Tonika Berkley, Gerry Whelan, Lois Murphy, Margaret Thompson, Andrea Barsevik, Eric Foster, Gale Gibbons, Lee Meinicke, Jim Salom, Lisa Dutton, Shobhi Kanal, Zachary Bosco-Dwornik, Nancy Anderson

Part I. Share our understanding of the meaning of theology and how it contributes to or gives shape to your personal life. Responses by participants included the following ideas or statements:

-- uncertainty about what "theology" is

-- uncertainty about whether UUs have a theology

-- "theology" meaning "the study of God," less useful than the concept of "spirituality" or spiritual grounding

-- the UU principles and sources of inspiration provide a sort of structure to orient people and guide us in what we should do; they offer a structure for thinking about what we're committed to and what such commitments mandate we do.

  -- for some in the group, theology includes "mysticism", "mystical existentialism", and the idea that there is something greater than us, or than the material world.

Part 2. How have you witnessed UU theology expressed or not expressed in the programs at USG? Responses included:

-- past USG programs like "Build Your Own Theology" and "Harper Academy" have offered the chance to reflect on or create one's personal theology and to learn about UU history and thought

-- UU theology is taught more explicitly in child spiritual development classes than in other USG programming.

-- UU101 is a helpful "crash course" in tenets of UU belief. It could be helpful to offer an expanded course where participants could delve into each of the 8 principles with a lay leader.

-- As a congregation, we live our theology through community service, Share the Plate, mutual caring activities for our fellow USGers and caring activities for those in the wider community.

-- USG services focus strongly on how we can live our lives according to the UU principles.

-- USG has more than 100 visitors each year, and most do not continue attending services or stay involved with USG. Perhaps we need to put our principles into practice more deeply and consistently in the ways we make people welcome?

-- UU principles are the most underutilized part of UUism, we don't talk about them enough. They are manifested implicitly in what we do but too seldom spoken of explicitly.

-- one way to discern the values of people or organizations, including our congregation and the UUA, is to observe how they allocate their money

-- USG programs like small group ministry, mindfulness programs, the ERC's activities, and others all help people discover or develop their own theology, by conducting their own search for truth and meaning.

-- In all of our programs, principles, etc, we're either serving others or serving our own search for truth and meaning.

-- The Widening the Circle documents points out that justice-seeking activities can't substitute for spiritual work.

-- Justice work without spiritual practice and theological resources leads to burnout. John Lewis and others who fought for justice with a long view were fortified by their spiritual and theological grounding.

Our meeting was then divided into breakout groups, where we discussed several questions:

How can we as a community move away from an attitude that puts emphasis on rejected beliefs?

How can we embrace a posture of working through honest and robust engagement?

How can we move toward commonly held beliefs and practices based on our inherited tradition?

What kinds of programming and activities could help members of our community to gain a rich and deep understanding of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist theologies?

In what ways could we intentionally and courageously make space for learning from people often marginalized in our communities?

When we reconvened, someone from each breakout group reported on the group's discussion. Among the ideas that came up in the breakout groups:

-- We don't think we do actually focus on rejected beliefs.

-- Why are we centering theology? We should accept that some people are running away from negative experiences with other religions or beliefs, and be welcoming to those people, make space for them to process their experiences.

-- We could offer a 6-week UU101-type class to go more into depth

-- We could invoke our UU principles more explicitly, and with more repetition, in our programming.

-- We like that UU theology encompasses many belief traditions

-- We want to be centering BIPOC people in our programs

-- Deep listening, story circles, programs like those Gerry has offered

-- Bohmian dialogue, kind of like Quaker meetings, acknowledges each speaker's reality

-- engage more people with our 8th principle

-- Widening the Circle meetings in which we go through the report's contents

-- Ritual and service link and bind people together

-- Find ways to bring UU history to life and into our worship and programming

-- BLUU Box program is a way of centering the history of Black UUs.

We discussed what we want to do in the next Widening the Circle meeting. Suggestions included:

-- Discuss the content of the document's Theology section.

-- Consider which recommendations we think we could put into place at USG in the short term

-- Consider ways to reach out more to marginalized groups. BLUU is very effective at this. Look into the ways DRUUMM (Diverse and Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries, TRUUST (Transgender Religious professional UUs Together), EqUUal Access (for people with disabilities) and other affinity groups reach out to marginalized groups in our denomination.

-- We haven't yet talked about how we are a covenantal community. That's a serious commitment and we should explore what this means or requires of us.