

Report on the Board's Linkage Sessions with the Congregation March 21, 2017

A big warm thank you to all who took the time to join the Board in discerning the future of OUUC. Approximately eighty people participated in the Linkage Meetings held in late January and early February of 2017. The discussions at each meeting were spirited and informative, especially for your Board. For those unable to make a meeting, the process used is outlined below.

We began with the question: "What is your heart's desire for OUUC, on both a personal and congregational level?" Individuals expressed their own ideas and commented on those of others. After gathering these ideas, participants grouped those which fit together thematically. Then each group of ideas was rated as 1, 3, or 5, indicating the importance and interest it held for the participants. The ideas were also identified by the Ends they represented and the Ministries with which they would be associated. The Linkage Team, a subcommittee of the Board, then grouped the ideas from all the Linkage Meetings into similar categories. The five themes that emerged as closest to the hearts of those who participated in these sessions included:

- Spirituality as the heart of congregational life;
- Providing a welcoming community to all who belong to OUUC and to those who long for a spiritual home;
- Connecting through deep listening and outreach;
- Leading in social action; and
- Enhancing our infrastructure so we can thrive as an institution.

In addition to learning about congregants' hearts' desires for OUUC on both a personal and congregational level, the Board was also interested in listening for the way congregants wished for the Ends to be implemented by the Ministries. The final section of this report, in chart form, identifies the Ends reflected in each of the five areas listed above, as well as which Ministries would likely be accountable for implementing them.

Spirituality as the Heart of Congregational Life

Members of several of the linkage groups identified aspects of spirituality as the core elements of their connection to OUUC. The two main themes that emerged from the discussions were that spirituality be the heart of our congregational life and that our spiritual lives and social justice work go together.

- Members of several of the linkage sessions expressed the profound desire that spirituality be the foundation for all else connected to OUUC. This means that the minister will create challenging, deeply spiritual services and sermons to inspire greater involvement in our church and community. It means that as children and adults, we will be transformed as we grow to understand and become all we can be spiritually. We will develop and clarify our spiritual values and learn how to live them. Church will be our spiritual home with high-quality services that weave into everything we do and with quiet times and spaces to foster renewal and reflection.

- Consistent with this is the expressed belief that our spiritual lives and justice work must go together: that our spiritual home is the center for our work for justice in the world; that we be a bright, caring presence in the community and the world; and that we stand on the side of love as we work to bend the arc of history toward justice.

These expressions of the heart of the participants of the linkage sessions, speak to all OUUC's Ends, but primarily End 1, "We expand our knowledge, deepen our understanding, and strengthen and live our Unitarian Universalist values," and End 2, "Our hearts are filled with experiences of wonder, awe, and connection to the spirit of life and love." The ministries primarily involved with creating spirituality as the heart of congregational life would be Spiritual Life and Lifespan Faith Development working with the other ministries, especially Faith in Action.

**Providing a Welcoming Community
to all who belong to OUUC and those who long for a spiritual home**

A major theme of this category was the need to engage and challenge our children and young families in ways that work for them. Reflected here as well was the desire that OUUC be a place where all can be themselves and find acceptance at this time in our world. Groups wanted to ensure that OUUC is a welcoming and hospitable community that reflects the richness of the community at large.

- Two groups expressed strong hopes about our role with children and families: that we engage families in ways that work for them, develop strategies to recruit and engage young families, and have a strong religious education program in which our congregation's children are known and challenged. Several groups mentioned a desire for intergenerational activities and support, and the hope that all, children and adults alike, find OUUC a place where they can be known and accepted. Those hopes took various forms: some wished for more opportunities for "foundational" conversations such as the linkage meetings were providing; others suggested a need for increasing awareness of the needs of our elders, and for encouraging the place of elders as mentors in our community; one group spoke to a desire to pass on our love of learning to our children; and some spoke to a need to help individuals and the congregation deal with stress in these troubling times.
- A major theme within this category was making sure that OUUC is a welcoming community, including the need to prepare for visitors and new members at this time of crisis in the world, and to welcome visitors so that they feel that they would like to return. There was a hope that OUUC would become a more diverse and enriching environment, and that we would become more reflective of the community at large in education, class, and ethnicity.

This is a broad category in which every congregational end was mentioned. End 3 was most often identified with this category, "People of all ages, identities, and circumstances are welcomed and connected in our loving community." Ends 1 and 2 (see above), End 4, "The Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation responds to the needs of a changing congregation and world," and End 5, "Our lives and those of the larger community are meaningfully changed through our collaborative work

for justice,” were also identified often. The ministry most frequently identified with this category was Community Life, while Spiritual Life, Faith in Action, and Lifespan Faith Development were also mentioned.

Connecting through Deep Listening and Outreach

One major theme that emerged across several linkage meetings was an urgent desire to connect with others on a deep level. Several groups also expressed the wish to reach out to the community so that OUUC and its values become better known.

- Numerous participants across several groups expressed a heart-felt need to find ways at this time in our country’s history to act and connect with a range of people – both those who share our values and those who don’t. There was a strong desire that we encourage deep listening to different viewpoints and promote civility in public discourse.

At least two groups expressed a desire for programs, possibly through Adult Education, by which to develop our skills and capacities for deep listening and for the clear and civil expression of our values, particularly to those who might think and feel differently. One group wanted to build a listening project specifically aimed toward understanding other religions.

- Several groups also spoke to the importance of outreach as a means by which to connect OUUC and the community more deeply. They desired that we employ our principles to reach out, to listen, and to communicate our values to the community at large, and to connect with and understand other faith communities. Our adult education program was considered a means of outreach to other individuals and groups in the community, and there was a desire to keep that program strong.

Several groups decided that the “listening” desires link primarily with End 4, “The Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation responds to the needs of a changing congregation and world”; and End 5, “Our lives and those of the larger community are meaningfully changed through our collaborative work for justice.” Some groups also identified End 3 as linking with this desire, “People of all ages, identities and circumstances are welcomed and connected in our loving community. “ The ministries primarily identified with “listening” were Faith in Action and Lifespan Faith Development.

The primary ends identified with the “outreach” desire were Ends 3 and 4. Some thought that this desire connected with Ends 1 and 5 as well. The ministries primarily identified with outreach were Community Life and Faith in Action.

Leading in Social Action

Members of every linkage group spoke of the importance of social justice work to our congregation. Not merely doing social justice work, but also providing leadership in those areas where individual and group needs and/or rights are being challenged. The three main themes that were highlighted were: OUUC’s providing leadership in its work with partners for social justice, OUUC providing inspiration and support

for individual action, and the congregation's taking on a single cause or project that can make a significant difference in people's lives, as did our work with Camp Quixote.

- In terms of providing leadership in working with community partners for social justice, group members challenged OUUC to provide inspiration, hope and guidance for action that really matters. There was a call to be visionary with vibrant ideas about what can be done together, and sharing those ideas with others, using a clear, effective and transformative voice. Leadership was also seen as working on the policy level, attacking the underlying causes of problems, in addition to specific actions to alleviate distress. A possible example of this was the call in one group to develop a curriculum on ethics and values, not based on religion, but rather similar to OWL, that is appropriate across different religious and age groups.

A specific type of leadership that was mentioned by several linkage groups was OUUC's alliance with Interfaith Works. There was an expressed desire for us to have an active involvement in Interfaith Works, as a leader in community social action. Many want our minister to play an active role both in the work of IFW and as a liaison between Interfaith Works and the OUUC congregation. This active connection would help us to know what is happening there and how we can collaborate.

- In terms of inspiration and support for individual action, group members saw an important role of OUUC as inspiring individual activism, especially in response to the political climate of our times. Although some had concerns about our church's being directly involved in political matters, they believed it could provide guidance to individuals by staying relevant and supporting focused action and active advocacy on behalf of our UU values. There was a desire for OUUC to encourage us to show up and be visible in the community and, at the same time, to welcome those seeking a secure value-based home in the community during this time of turmoil.
- Finally, a number of groups expressed the wish that OUUC take on a single social justice cause or project for the whole congregation to work on together, as it did in helping to establish and maintain Camp Quixote, then Quixote Village. Ideas included: addressing problems associated with individuals experiencing homelessness (especially youth and families), poverty, gender issues, aging, being an urban Native American or refugee family.

These social action aspirations primarily relate to three Ends: End 4, "The Olympia Unitarian Universalist Congregation responds to the needs of a changing congregation and world;" End 5, "Our lives and those of the larger community are meaningfully changed through our collaborative work for justice;" and End 6, "We advocate for environmental justice and practice care for the earth." The ministries primarily involved in actualizing our leadership in social action would be Faith in Action and Lifespan Faith Development, coordinating with Spiritual Life and Community Life.

Infrastructure

This category spoke to specific matters relating to the financial and corporate viability of OUUC, as well as the physical structure. Of particular interest was how we communicate what we are doing among ourselves and with the wider community. Much of the discussion related to how we could use social media more efficiently on our website, making this a subset of our infrastructure.

- The financial viability of the church, based on a well thought-out strategic plan, had strong support as did the idea that members be specifically recruited and trained in financial leadership.
- Another interest that produced a good deal of energy was that of financially supporting the Faith in Action Ministry.
- That Policy Governance be fully implemented and that we explore the rules governing our Congregational Meeting were mentioned.
- In two different groups, physical growth and the need for more space, and maybe additional services, was of interest. A desire to finish Phase One of the building plan to expand the sanctuary by initiating a new Capital Campaign was brought up.
- There was much discussion around the use of social media, along with more conventional media, to announce sermon topics and other communications with the congregation, in a desire to raise visibility, invite participation and engage newcomers.
- One group of younger members of our congregation got behind the idea that “Community is held together by good communication.” They had many specific suggestions on just how to do that better and more widely. There was a good deal of energetic discussion about major improvements to our use of Facebook on our website and possibilities of thereby reaching younger people who live by social media.

These comments were mostly attributed to End 4, “OUUC responds to the needs of a changing congregation and world,” although Ends 1, 3 and 5 were also mentioned. The ministries most selected were Resources, Spiritual Life, and Community Life. Faith in Action was mentioned as it relates to the financial commitment to that ministry, and the reference to Policy Governance was directed to the Board. The comments regarding communication were considered to come under Ends 3 and 4. Most saw the ministries in the communication area to be Resources, although Community Life and Lifespan Faith Development were also mentioned.

Linkage Committee Members: Jim Anest, Lorrie Eaton, Martha Nicoloff, and Mary Anne Trause