

2021 UUFb SHARED MINISTRY ASSESSMENT SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The UUFb Committee on Ministry has the task of conducting periodic congregational assessments. In compiling information for an assessment, CoM considered the UUFb's Covenant, Mission and Goals, as well as the Seven UU Principles. It is important to note that the term "ministry" refers to the shared ministry created by the minister, the Board, the staff, and the committees, as well as the congregation at large. In an assessment, CoM is attempting to "get the pulse" of the congregation and to put into practice a feature of our Fifth UU Principle, which emphasizes "the use of the democratic process within our congregation." The Covid-19 Pandemic, with its restrictions, has presented a particular challenge for our UUFb community in terms of assembling and communicating.

For the 2021 Ministry Assessment, each of our five CoM members planned to interview three UUFb members, friends, or children, beginning in January, 2021. We completed thirteen interviews representing a broad cross-section of the congregation, in terms of gender, age, and ethnicity; the assessment includes both twelve adults (seven females and five males) and one middle school child and comprises about 10% of UUFb congregants. The middle school student was interviewed without a parent. We also received some comments from the parent of a high school student which matched other information we received in interviews, although the parent's remarks did not constitute a formal interview. Other people in a larger pool of possible interviewees were contacted but were unable to take part. While more interviews would have been valuable, CoM members reluctantly decided to go forward with the assessment report. We explained to the interviewees that the information shared would be confidential and that any content reported to the congregation would not include any identifying information.

This report is not comprehensive in the sense that there are not comments on every aspect of Fellowship life. We asked open-ended questions, so that the interviewees could talk about what was important to them, and their comments reflect that approach. We provided three prompts to begin our interviews and encouraged those interviewed to contact us if they had any additional thoughts that would be important for us to know. The following report consists of information collected from the interviews and presents observations divided into six categories. Interviewees offered many positive comments and often combined concerns with suggestions for the future.

1. SUNDAY SERVICES

In the opinion of many interviewees, the UUFb has attempted to follow our Mission Statement in welcoming diversity through our online services, attracting congregants

from both Montana and beyond. The Sunday Service Committee has provided a variety of service topics in an effort to foster spiritual and intellectual growth in our community. The Social Hour, despite its virtual limitations, has been an attempt to nurture our community and hold it together during the pandemic. Those interviewed considered the inclusion of a Story for All Ages and musical presentations positive features of Sunday Services.

Several of those interviewed had less of a sense of community with an online service and social hour. As suggestions for the future, some interviewees expressed the wish to continue virtual services in some form as we transition to meeting in person; in addition, they wanted to provide other opportunities for socializing after the Sunday Service. Others suggested better integrating children into the service and tying the RE topic of the day to the topic of the service. Building strong holiday traditions within a UU framework was the desire of a number of interviewees.

2. COMMUNITY

Many interviewees found the UUFB community to be friendly, liberal, and supportive. They appreciated the variety of faith backgrounds and the respect for differences among people, and they wanted a religious community in which to raise their children. Several of those interviewed pointed out the success of the auction as an example of community effort. Interviewees praised the feeling of community created by the Joys and Concerns section of the Sunday Service, pre-pandemic Circle Suppers, and the Men's Group.

Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the need to grow our community. Several pointed out that UUFB members are aging and that we need to have more young people involved in our congregation. Others cited a need for a more visible UUFB presence in the larger community.

3. COMMUNICATIONS

During the pandemic UUFB communications continued through the ListServ, providing the Newsletter, Announcements, and congregational information. Interviewees praised the connection provided by the ListServ, as a means of communication with other congregants. Interviewees also commended committees and discussion groups for providing communication during the pandemic. They appreciated the work of the Caring Committee in calling people.

Several interviewees mentioned the need for a Directory with the names and photos of Members and Friends and the need for a way for the community to share facts about their lives. There was also a suggestion for a more condensed newsletter with brief announcements, rather than long explanations and explorations.

4. SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

UUFB involvement in social justice issues continued throughout the pandemic with the Second Sunday Plate offerings to social and environmental organizations, Family Promise participation, and online workshops and discussion groups. These activities were aligned with our Mission to inspire compassion, to act for justice, and to sustain our living planet. Many interviewees praised the UUFB commitment to social justice, citing in particular the Right Relations Program, White Fragility Groups, and, in general, outreach to people of color.

Interviewers recorded no concerns or suggestions for the future on social justice.

5. RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Providing vibrant religious education, as hoped for in our Vision Statement, was particularly difficult during the last year. Most of the observations presented refer to the pre-pandemic RE program. Interviewees praised the religious education program for younger children, with its spiritually oriented, age-appropriate activities. They liked the liberal, ethics-based focus and the presence of peers for the younger children.

Interviewees observed a number of needs: an increase in RE enrollment, particularly among older children and teens; greater integration of children into the mainstream of UUFB community life; and greater interaction between children and older members. Interviewees also mentioned creating a stronger program for teens, offering regular opportunities for children to spend time together to form friendships, and establishing discussion groups for children to tackle issues important to their age groups.

6. UUFB LEADERSHIP

While there were no specific comments in the interviews about Board Members and Committee Chairs, there was much implied approval of the actions of leadership in the areas presented: Sunday Services, Community, Communications, Social Justice Issues, and Religious Education. The actions of staff members, although they were not commented upon, were instrumental in the ongoing functioning of the UUFB, and interviewees expressed thanks for the smooth functioning of the Fellowship. Interviewers praised Rev. Duffy's attention to pastoral care.

Interviewees did not offer any concerns or suggestions for the future in this area.

CONCLUSION

The members of the Committee on Ministry express our thanks to all those who agreed to be interviewed and who participated with us by sharing their opinions honestly and forthrightly. In a difficult year with many challenges, the UUFB tried to follow our Mission Statement and live our Covenant, which we say together at every Service. There were both commonalities and differences in the observations of our interviewees. Some interviewees gave us many reasons to feel pride in our accomplishments, but their comments indicating the areas where we need to do better were equally valuable. Their negative concerns may lead us to consider the ways in which we can create a future which better embodies our Mission and our Vision. We welcome diversity in their opinions as we also welcome diversity in our Members and Friends.

In all of the categories presented in the assessment, there were many positive comments. The areas in which our interviewees noted the greatest needs were in the areas of Community, Religious Education, and Communications. We need to continue to grow our congregation to include a younger and more diverse population. We also need to expand our RE Program to serve older children and teens more effectively. We have effective communications in our community, but we can strive to improve and build on what we have created. When we can again meet in person and be out in the world, we can begin to address the ways in which we can further align our Fellowship goals with our UU Principles, particularly our Sixth Principle (the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice) and our Seventh Principle (respect for the independent web of all existence of which we are a part.)

The assessment leaves us with a concern and a question regarding the culture of the UUFB. As a congregation, we want to consider ourselves open to diversity, but are we open to including children and youth in all aspects of UUFB life? We are strong, but we can become stronger when we become truly diverse.