

What We're Saying: Notes from the Neighborhood Meetings

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This is a congregation with an immense and rich storehouse of memories -- I know, because the first question I asked in the neighborhood group meetings was: Name a meaningful experience you have had in our church. These experiences are strengths to draw on, to sustain us through the tough times. Tough times there have been and tough times there will be.

This is also a congregation replete with hopes. I asked a second question: What do you hope for for our church? Our hopes are for pulling together and honestly facing of our difficulties; they are for living up to our spiritual ideals and achieving our building plans. We do not voice grand ambitions or unreasonable expectations. Has our history made us cautious, wary of hoping too much, for fear of another disappointment?

Then I asked a third question: What barriers do you see to our achieving our hopes? No one said, "None." This is a congregation that sees many large and small barriers to fulfillment of our hopes. Often we point to external constraints -- things that are in the nature of our local geography and history, or the limits of time, energy and money, or "just the way UUs are." Many others named internal constraints -- things we could or should overcome, things we need to reach inside ourselves and find the imagination and commitment to break through.

Ten neighborhood meetings were held, in 10 far-flung communities, on 10 successive Saturday and Sunday evenings. They were organized by board member Mary Lou Lunin, and hosted by members, with gourmet hors d'oeuvres, and many new and renewed friendships. Thank you, Mary Lou, and thank you, all, for welcoming me. So here's my report on what *we* are saying *about us*. I am keeping my own voice very quiet, to bring to the fore your voices -- some 200 individual voices, with individual thoughts.

Our meaningful experiences most often involve other people: We spoke of making new friends, of a "network of friends," of longstanding friendships, of supportive personal relationships. And of the importance, in this, of an ancient Unitarian sacrament, the coffee hour. Particular people were remembered: a feisty, acute, politically informed person -- "she brought soul and mind together" -- and Dr. Trapp (who retired in 1970).

We spoke of things we worked on together. The Garage Sale was the single most often mentioned event. Working for the Alliance, teaching Sunday school, advising the youth groups, serving on adult ed and children's RE committees, and even (get this) running the

financial canvass. We like taking leadership and we like satisfying work. We like the comradeship of a common cause and shared sweat (especially at the Garage Sale). One I especially liked: the interim minister search process -- coming to a successful conclusion. And this Watchung Mountain high: "The congregational meeting when 98 percent of [us] voted to be together under one roof."

We named the things we value most deeply: the sense of community, the people, the warm fellowship, the companionship of thought, and "improvising personal relationships." Also personal involvement in service and social action, specifically: volunteering for the homeless shelter in Newark, the science education project for inner-city children, the food bank, the peace committee. Another frequently mentioned "thing we value most deeply" was the RE program for children, working with Carol Haag, and noted many times: Carol's way of making it a welcoming place for children and parents. The teaching experience, the RE worship experience, and what's more (as one delighted parent said), "My children really like it -- they wouldn't miss it."

Sunday services were one of the most frequently mentioned sources of meaningful experience: Many spoke of David Bumbaugh's sermons. Some remember Dean Starr's and Jacob Trapp's sermons with special warmth. In a couple of cases, it was the very first sermon the person heard from David or Jacob -- an experience strongly associated with the feeling of a spiritual "homecoming." One spoke of David's sermons on social justice. Several spoke of Christmas Eve services. One spoke of the beauty of this worship space. And of course music generally and the organ in particular were named as "most meaningful" again and again. A few also remembered services incorporating the other arts (dance and drama) as high points. Several recalled the Green Shoes production. And the Flower Communion. And the New Year's service of remembrance.

Quite a few people spoke of special services involving them personally: their own weddings, their children's weddings, their parents' memorial services, friends' memorial services, the Coming of Age in which their own daughter or son had taken part and spoken for themselves in all their young, fumbling, earnest eloquence.

Some also mentioned experiences of receiving pastoral care from a minister, when they were troubled or ill. One spoke of the care extended by a minister whose continued ministry she had opposed. Others thanked the Caring and Sharing group for their special supportive care.

Other church programs also came in for special mention: Many spoke of the dinner discussion groups as a source of friendship and fun and intellectual stimulus. Several spoke of something I hadn't known existed: the men's support groups. Also mentioned as most meaningful: the choir, the Transylvania Partner Church program, a Jewish heritage workshop, the UU-United Nations envoy program, going to Star Island summer conferences, taking part in David and Beverly's farewell, Ken Hamrick's virtuosity, afternoon music concerts.

One said: "Going to an adult religious retreat on spirituality -- a weekend of developing friendships and many hours contemplating what Unitarian Universalism and spirituality mean to me." Another said: "Christmas Eve with Dr. Trapp -- the altar was banked with greens; his beautiful readings, 'They have lighted the candles, Mary'; the spirituality I felt. And sadly, on my first Christmas Eve after both parents were gone, how alone and overwhelmed I felt. The sadness just came on suddenly." And another: "I brought my parents (devout Catholics) to services -- horizons were broadened a little and anxiety levels were lowered a little."

Many people spoke of spiritual and moral qualities as the most important part of their experience of this community: sharing ideas, a sense of being at home here, finding here a broadened awareness and understanding, a sense of companionship among equals, the experience of freedom of belief, a liberal faith for our children. A few people noted the value they place on the structured form of our services, as distinct (I think) from free form.

One said he discovered Jacob Trapp's rendition of the *Tao Te Ching* while sitting up 'til all hours at a teenage overnigher. Another said: "Setting aside one hour a week to 'restore my soul,' to have a 'temporary stay against confusion' in a lovely setting, with people I know, hearing good music, singing and becoming inspired by a good sermon." Another said: "For the first time in my life I can comfortably look someone in the eye and name, identify, *my* religious faith."

What do we hope for? Many times over we said: We hope for the proposed building program to be approved and carried to successful completion. No surprise. In fact, after the first two neighborhood meetings I said: You're not allowed to say "the building," but only, if it's the building that's foremost on your mind, "the building that will help us do such-and-such."

No matter. The building program was the hands-down winner in the "what I hope for" sweepstakes. To be sure, there were a couple of doubters who spoke up and said, "I hope we do something different." One worried out loud about the non-provision in the plan for parking. But everyone else, it seems, feels this is the No. 1 big thing that we must accomplish, for it will bring us together under one roof. Some warned that the building in itself was not a panacea, an automatic cure for our separation into two communities. One said she hoped we would take care of a new building better than we have taken care of the buildings we now have. (Ouch!) Another simply hoped for better building maintenance, new building or not.

We hope, in overwhelming numbers, to overcome the split in the congregation between two communities: the RE families up the avenue, and the rest of us here. (Note that it is not just the separation of children that concerns some of us.) We hope the new building will bring us together, we hope for more interaction between RE and non-RE people, we hope for more acceptance of children in our services here, we hope for interaction among age groups. We ache with the sense of being two different communities, and the feeling that this makes ever so much more difficult whatever we try to do.

Many hope for more congregational involvement than they see at present. Several hope that a new settled parish minister will lead us well -- reflecting, I think, an underlying anxiety over the minister as spiritual unifier, and as community-builder. One recalled polarization over the minister as happening several times since the 1970s, concerned that it not happen again. Several said they hoped we weathered the present transition period well -- aware, I think, that it won't be an easy ride. Several said they hoped for numerical growth. Some linked growth to our ability to finance our building needs. One said she hopes more people will find "a spiritual home" among us.

On the level of community spirit: We hope for a common sense of purpose, for a unifying mission, for a shared vision and commitment. We hope for coffee hours with no distracting committee meetings, for better communication, for a welcoming and inclusive culture. One person hopes that the church will have a chance "to grow, and to grow up" (another ouch!); another, that we will overcome resistance to an acknowledgment of God; another, that we will see a time of change not as a threat but as an opportunity for positive growth. Several spoke of the transitional period we are now in as difficult, something they hope we will manage successfully. How? Words like "commitment," "energy" and "unity" come up again and again.

We have strong hopes for our church: that we should become better known as a liberal presence in the community. That we should gain acceptance not as a fringe group or a "cult." That we be more mindful of, and that we reconnect with, our heritage. That we be more tolerant of our own religious diversity (less intolerant of differences, said another). That we be clearer about our common beliefs. That we be more inclusive of our Judeo-Christian heritage. That we be a leader in the community, a strong voice for social justice, and reaffirm our Unitarian Universalist principles.

We have many hopes for new and revitalized programs: dinner discussions and other sorts of discussion groups, small groups, special interest groups, neighborhood or regional groups. Mentoring new members, social action, community outreach, a children's choir -- all achievable wishes. But how? Some expressed hope for more effective committee and organizational structures -- for newcomer greeting, for capital fund-raising, for a representative board, for Caring and Sharing. A few hope for organizational leadership from a parish minister, and one for congregational support of the minister. Others hope for more effective administration, but staff roles, other than the ministers, mostly went unmentioned.

What do we need? We named community-building activities, a better sense of community, and more cultural or racial diversity. We said we need to attract more young families (to fill the ranks of the aging), to make connections across generational lines, to be more welcoming and more supportive of each other, to gain more teenage members and more young adults. One said: "I hope we will continue to encourage the 'talent pool' of lay leaders, to carry on in the period of transition. I'd like to see every member of our church become either a leader in some aspect of the church, or a cheerleader."

What barriers do we see to the fulfillment of our hopes? What keeps us from being all we could be, and indeed, undermines us? We noted the over-busy-ness of people's lives these days, and the consequent lack of volunteers; the wide geographic spread of the congregation, and the consequent lack of knowing each other and of being willing to attend meetings. One felt a lack of energy, one a lack of skills, another a lack of responsibility; not a few, a lack of commitment. Two said, "We lack passion."

We are fairly harsh on ourselves. Our self-image is unclear and our self-confidence shaky. Several spoke of rigid, "we've always done it this way" attitudes. One said we were like "the blind men and the elephant," too often missing the big picture, the church community as a whole. One said: "Thinking in too limited a way limits many hopes. We should aim higher in our sense of our place in the community, in the denomination, and in our plans for ourselves."

Some barriers are seen in the way we are: Leading Unitarians is like herding cats. We are insular, and have a "we vs. them" attitude toward the community around us. Also, we are theologically diverse, and so have difficulty forming a clear religious identity. This has consequences. As one said, "We don't put ourselves forward to attract new members." Another, "We are a church of the disenchanted, so it's difficult to form a common goal." All of which makes me want to ask: Are we saying, This is what we are and we won't change? Do we confuse authentic diversity, which promotes significant interchange and energizes us, with disunity and not listening, and consequent "distancing" from one another?

There are some barriers within our Sunday services themselves. These things were named: unsingable hymns, handholding at the end of services, the PA system, and excessive light from the front window. We can work on those practical questions. The deeper difficulties we struggle with will yield only to serious soul-searching and deep discussion. Especially this: the long-ignored spiritual consequences of our physical separation. One person said it precisely: "We've been apart so long, it's difficult to relate." And this: The loss of institutional self-confidence due to our inability to achieve a building program: "We are always in the process of planning, so we do not take care of what we have. We waste time and energy and money on another dream."

Many themes came up again and again: our age segregation. Our intellectualism (talking about spirituality rather than practicing it). Our need for more communication among us - - a need that these neighborhood groups themselves took a first large step toward filling. I believe that a great many of the things we note as barriers are consequences of an underdeveloped infrastructure -- the committees and groups and supporting staff work that will enable us to engage more people and more energies in the work of this church. Not enough money? Well, nobody said we were poor. Then is it that we're stingy? Or is it (as I prefer to think) that we have not challenged ourselves in effective ways, starting with: Responsible stewardship is one basic element of membership.

I will not often analyze and editorialize and exhort so little. But I thought it was important for each of us simply to hear one another, individually. There is no way to sum

up these many voices into one. But I hope you have heard, as I did, a deep longing underlying a great many of our appreciations and concerns: We have felt stymied, as a church community, and we long for a breakthrough and a new beginning. Our energies have been diverted into unproductive paths and our decision-making too often has faltered. We are looking for leadership to help us join our many hopes in a shared vision, and to point the way forward. Whatever the outcome of the Board of Adjustment meeting tomorrow, we are ready to move. *Whatever the outcome*, I said. Then let us move forward together.