

Committee on Ministry

UUFA Review of Congregational Ministry

2005–2006

Introduction

This report is a compilation of results gained from a review of the ministry of the UUFA. The Committee on Ministry used a qualitative approach, a more feminist theology, toward gathering the information. Committee members, along with members of the Board of Directors, talked to families one-on-one to discuss their passions in the Fellowship (i.e. what keeps them coming and gets them energized). There were no set questions during each conversation. This enabled the members of the congregation, not the committee or board members, to lead the direction of the discussions, thus bringing out the aspects of the Fellowship that were most important to them. The process allowed more personal journeys and gave members the opportunity to express their thoughts and opinions. Additionally, it was an opportunity to reconnect with the members. The final task performed during the conversations was a review of the minister's position.

We were helped by Paul Turner of AMOS, a Mid-Iowa Organizing Strategy. He led a training session that taught conversation leaders about the philosophy of one-on-one conversations and how to learn from others without formulaic questions.

The goal was to meet with every UUFA family, about 190. We ended up meeting with about 80.

The conversations were a great hit with all involved. The members and those conducting the conversations enjoyed the process and had the added benefit of meeting new people.

The conversation leaders were given a list of about 10 names to contact, including both names chosen by the leaders and random assignments. Each participant then contacted members on their list and engaged in one-on-one conversations. The results were recorded and compiled.

The Committee on Ministry read through the results individually to find common themes and points of interest. Members then came together as a group and agreed upon the top 10 categories that emerged:

- Ministry
- The Minister
- Sunday Program
- Sermons
- Membership
- The Role of Each Generation
- Religious Education
- Social Justice
- The Arts
- Spirituality

This set of categories was divided among the members of the committee, and the results were reread with the specific themes in mind. Committee members wrote overviews of results from their assigned themes. The following are their summaries. Each section is written in a different voice. This format mirrors the variety of individuals that form the UUFA. At the end of the report is a list of implications for the Fellowship derived from the results.

Major Themes

Ministry

Expressed opinions state that we are a strong community and pay a great deal of attention to being a shared ministry. Members were quick to note that this is the way the Fellowship started and how the Fellowship should continue. Participants mentioned that they come to the Fellowship because of the community involved. The shared ministry is a large factor in bringing that sense of community out. People mentioned that they think the relationship between lay members and the minister is working very well. Some expressed concerns that more people should be integrated into leadership more quickly. Some expressed concerns about burnout or stagnation with volunteers. Could we include more individuals in leadership school?

Several factors were mentioned when talking about the success of our ministry. The Caring Ministry Council, events such as Wellspring Wednesdays and other adult educational opportunities, solstice gatherings, the Women's Spirituality group, brown-bag lunches, other affinity groups, and, of course, potluck dinners. Some also stated that, although they may not attend these types of events because of time or interest, it is good that we still offer them.

It was mentioned that the Fellowship may want to gain a focus on what is put forward in our ministry. We are trying to be all things to all people. It was also stated that the Fellowship should try harder to integrate new members.

Suggestions:

- men's spirituality group
- Christianity affinity group
- miss seeing people from other service; maybe more all-congregation events.

Many have found the Fellowship to be a tremendous community of acceptance and hospitality. They have developed ties that have extended into life well beyond Sunday morning.

The Minister

This section describes what was expressed about the role of the minister in the Fellowship. The majority of the statements relayed that the minister should be a partner with the congregation in the shared ministry of the Fellowship. The minister should work with committees and the board to help lead the Fellowship in the shared direction. Important tasks of the minister include being a presence in Sunday programs, performing pastoral care, and being a silent leader that guides forward progress. It is also important that the minister have a presence in the community both locally and in the wider UU environments.

A couple of comments stated the minister should have a greater role both in the direction of the congregation and, specifically, in Sunday programs. This may be a product of how much the Fellowship respects and is moved by our current minister.

Brian Eslinger received a lot of praise during this process. Many expressed a sense that his talents fit perfectly with what the UUFA needs in a minister. He works well with the congregation and is a draw on Sunday mornings.

Brian is seen as great leader. He is centered, sensitive, calm under pressure, and grounded. All these aspects guide his ability to work with the varied members of the congregation. He brings out the leadership qualities in others.

The sermons presented by Brian are very popular, based on the opinions expressed in the survey. Brian has a great knowledge base on which to draw. Combined with his compassion and presentation style, he has the ability to inspire many congregation members on Sunday. Members feel his sermons are thought-provoking. The sermon section of this report goes into more details.

Some of the most frequent comments regarding Brian are in the area of his work in the community. Members said they see him everywhere. His work with the Interfaith Council, Youth and Shelter Services, and the Prairie Star district are appreciated. This work is seen as benefiting the Fellowship. He is a great ambassador for what the Fellowship believes and represents. The only work outside of his Fellowship duties that drew mixed reactions is his current teaching at ISU.

Some see his new classes at ISU as distracting and time-consuming. Some know how much work goes into teaching university classes and wonder whether it is taking away from important Fellowship duties. Many others feel that his teaching at ISU can only be an asset to the congregation. His research and enthusiasm for the classes brings new life and vibrancy to his Sunday sermons. This fall's Building Your Own Theology sessions received some of the most favorable comments in the survey.

Other concerns are that some feel he is being stretched too thin. Brian is a hard worker, and people are worried about burnout. He needs more support. One comment expressed concern that he worked too long with some people regarding pastoral care. This all leads to a major concern, which is that we may end up losing Brian to another congregation. The survey responses mention frequently that Brian is a great asset and is very talented. He fits well in the role of what this Fellowship desires in a minister. Many commented that the Fellowship should do whatever possible to keep Brian happy.

Sunday Program

The Sunday morning program is a very important part of the ministry of the Fellowship. Generally, people are very pleased with the programs. Favorable comments were made both about services that were led by the minister and about those that were lay-led.

This remains an area of much debate. Opinions were expressed on both sides of issues such as discussion sessions, amount of reflection time, and children in the services. There still seems to be a desire for more variety in lay services. The Fellowship and Sunday Morning Program Committee should work to bring in new voices.

Suggestions:

- more discussion
- less discussion
- more services on how to be a UU and how to talk about being a UU

- monitor milestones that are too lengthy and inappropriate
- more variety in lay-led services
- more Brian
- continue music; but many differing views ranging from “it is great” to “needs more variety”
- be attentive to the role of children; comments ranged from “they are important and should be included” to “they should not be in service at all.”

Sermons

As Sunday morning programs are seen as one of the most important parts of the Fellowship, the sermon is the key component of the day. The sermons have the ability to bring people together to think about activism, personal theology, spirituality, and much more. They bring the congregation together, spark a variety of discussions, and lead to special interest groups. Sermons are one of the main components of the Fellowship’s shared ministry. A variety of topics and styles is appreciated. Many voices come together to bring a multitude of experiences and perspectives that help individuals grow along their paths.

Members enjoy hearing from talented speakers who make them think. Some expressed gratitude that the Fellowship has so many speakers who talk from their personal knowledge and experience and are able to make members think and become energized.

The majority of opinions expressed put a high mark on Brian’s services. He is great at bringing out many levels of a topic and sparking thought. Many said he is the main reason they come to Sunday programs. The Building Your Own Theology series last fall has been noted as some of his finest work.

Many said they would like to see more of Brian, even during lay services. They wish he would speak every Sunday. The question was asked whether his time off for study and his teaching at ISU bring new life and vitality to his sermons. One member said she sees the benefits of his time off. She believes that the times she has spent preparing her own “sermon” for the Fellowship has helped her grow spiritually. Others feel that this is a distraction to other Fellowship duties.

Others said they get more out of lay services. Lay services are good, and some see improvements lately over previous years. Respondents appreciated hearing multiple voices on Sundays. Guest speakers are great and bring in new perspectives. Specific individuals mentioned as great speakers were Mary Sawyer, Mark Witherspoon, and Vic Moss.

One counterpoint to those who get a lot out of lay services is the view that we need to inject new discussion leaders to bring in new excitement and energy. Some say they often see the same people and would like to hear from others, as well as new guest speakers.

So it appears that, as a variety of individuals make up our congregation, so, too, must we have a variety of programs. Respondents feel that both are assets to the congregation. Many said they do see the relationship between the two types of sermons and saw both as necessary. We are not just one person talking about what it is to be Unitarian Universalist.

Those taking part in one-on-one conversations were generally pleased with the current structure. There will always be special interests who would like specific changes. Some love lectures;

others do not. Some enjoy storytelling; others would prefer more rituals. Some would like more reflection time, while others desire more discussion.

Membership

Fellowship members were not specifically asked about membership issues during the recent round of interviews. Nonetheless, from some of the general comments, it is possible to gain insights as to why respondents joined the UUFA and why they continue their participation.

Of course, one problem is that what is attractive to some (for example, spirituality) is a bit of a repellent to others. However, we do seem to agree on some things. The building itself is a great draw. As one person said, it's our social space. Most respondents were also quite impressed with and strongly supportive of the Religious Education program at the Fellowship. Numerous respondents cited RE for their children as the reason they started to come to the Fellowship.

Many Protestants seem to choose their church homes based primarily on how they like the ministers. In this regard, we seem to fit the mold. Brian's ministry is clearly a huge positive factor in drawing and retaining membership.

Other factors attractive to those surveyed were the informality and friendliness of the Fellowship. The sense of a welcoming community was also important to many. The lack of doctrine was stated as a reason why several people fled other religious institutions in favor of the UUFA. One respondent said, "I feel the Fellowship is like a big support group for a lot of people."

In terms of push factors that may keep people away, the shortage of parking was generally the first and often the only thing that occurred to people. One person said it would be nice if the elevator could stop at the Tower Room level. Someone also mentioned that it would be great if we could have facilities big enough to go back to just one service on Sunday mornings.

RE, inclusiveness, informality, the sense of community, Brian's ministry, and our generally liberal views—these are the factors that draw people to the Fellowship. And these are the reasons they keep coming back.

The Role of Each Generation

When asked about the role of each generation in the Fellowship during interviews conducted in early 2006, most members indicated that they were favorably disposed toward multigenerational programming. Many respondents focused on the time that children spend downstairs at the beginning of some services. Typically, people like seeing the children and feel that their participation is helpful and interesting for them. One member said that the participation of young people helps to build their self-esteem and self-confidence. Another respondent said, "It feels a little sad and lonely when the kids leave."

While most responses were favorable, about one-fourth indicated dislike, or at least mixed feelings, about having the kids present for the opening of some services. One of the more vocal opponents said, "I do not like children being part of the Sunday program. I feel it trivializes programs and upsets the flow." Other respondents were more moderate in their criticisms but still expressed some reservations.

In addition to the youth participation on Sundays, other aspects of multigenerational programming that were mentioned favorably were the mentoring program, the Coming of Age Program, Secret Friends, the high school program, and services where young people have a participatory role. In general, members value the intergenerational emphasis at the Fellowship and the opportunities that it provides for relating to those with whom they do not normally have a great deal of interaction.

Two respondents indicated a wish for more intergenerational events and activities. Another person said that the multigenerational activities seem to draw in and support young families. While there are some dissenting opinions, most members are quite favorable to those activities and programs that reach out along cross-generational lines. As one member said, "It just seems good to connect the generations."

Religious Education

In interviews conducted early in 2006, most Fellowship members indicated that the Religious Education program was very important. Several cited RE as the reason, or one of the reasons, that they originally joined the Fellowship.

The interviews also suggest that the program is seen as strong. One respondent characterized it as "an excellent program." The respondent added, "I appreciate the quality of the kids my kids get to interact with." In the comparative religion department, one person stated flatly that, "UU has a far better RE program than Unity." Another respondent talked of the very significant impact the RE program had on the lives of their children. "Our RE program is a central part of rearing our children," the interviewee continued.

Among the reasons given for the importance of RE were: the need to give children a good foundation for seeking "truth," the desire to have young people know about other religions, and the recognition of the spiritual aspects of life. As one interviewee said, "RE changed our children's lives. I cannot say enough about how good it is and how important it is." The RE director was also singled out for high praise.

In addition, respondents valued the program for older youth. The Coming of Age curriculum, in particular, was seen as strong and successful. Again, Benette Sherman, director of youth and children's ministries, was given much of the credit for the success of the youth activities. Another interviewee stated that the program was much better than she expected: "I feel very appreciative of the way our high-schoolers are valued and served by our congregation. Benette is such an asset," she concluded.

The RE program is seen by members as giving children and youth great exposure to other cultures, religions, and ways of life. The children's view of the world is wider, and that helps them to grow. One interviewee said, "We came from an international city and don't see as much diversity here in Ames. The Fellowship gives other cultures respect and brings forward issues that we would not otherwise get exposed to in our community."

Other things mentioned positively included the environment that models inclusion, the RE day camp, the Boston trip, and the Secret Friends program.

Social Justice

UUs are proud that our Fellowship is collectively active in our larger community regarding issues of social justice. We live the UU principles. We are able to point to our involvement with AMOS, the Emergency Residence Project, and the regular disbursement of collection funds to social justice initiatives as just a few real examples of this practice. Members value that social justice is actively practiced and supported within our inclusive, nurturing community.

Individual UUs choose to be personally active in our larger community. We do this through our work, how we volunteer, and issues with which we involve ourselves. We do this as a personal expression of our beliefs, but it also serves as a public example of the UU principles.

Some members feel that our collective and individual actions are not tangibly tied to our Fellowship or the UU principles and would like us to be more proactive in this area. The larger community may not know us by how we choose to act and/or believe. Correcting this may lead to attracting new members. Other members feel fine with a less-conspicuous expression. They will participate in social justice in other ways and look to the Fellowship for regeneration/spiritual development.

The Arts

UUs embrace the arts and contribute artistically on a regular basis. Members see art expressed in many ways. They also appreciate the art of everyday things. UUs like that our Fellowship facility is a place where art is shared and nurtured. Members appreciate the way our place is a home for paintings, photography, sculpture, dance, music, poetry, and theater. Specifically, music is an important part of regular Sunday meetings. We appreciate that individuals and groups feel supported as they develop their art.

Some members believe there could be more diversity in the choice of music. Specifically, it is felt that generational and/or genera questions may need more attention.

Spirituality

While perhaps seemingly unrelated, the themes this report brings together—place and spirituality—are indeed interrelated for much of the congregation. Not surprisingly, many UUs who were interviewed are hesitant, uncertain, somewhat ambivalent, or altogether disinterested in the concept—and practice—of spirituality. Importantly, for purposes of identifying the pulse of our congregation, those who expressed utter and complete disinterest in a definition of spirituality simultaneously expressed an understanding and tolerance for others to explore and even discuss spirituality as a concept and a practice.

However, some of those who are seeking a spiritual home feel varying degrees of dissatisfaction with the ways in which spirituality is (not) expressed, discussed, or practiced. Still other participants identified the UUFA as a spiritual space, place, or home: Some have found their spirituality at the UUFA; others are still seeking. Finally, those who expressed that the UUFA is indeed a place they consider to be spiritual—or one in which they work to make meaning of their spirituality—also expressed a desire for more mediation (or quiet time, silent time, reflective time) during services.

- We might be losing some people to [other congregations] because they are offer more inspiring/spiritual bases.
- [I] want more spirituality.
- [I] want much more.
- I'm not getting it.
- Spirituality is not the first reason for coming.
- [Spirituality] includes doing good works and [doing good works] is one of the most important reasons [we] come to the Fellowship.
- I have found it here.

Nature as spiritual space

- [My] higher power is nature.
- The solstice event is very significant in our search for religious experience.
- I am a humanist and believe one finds spirituality in nature and community.

One theme that emerged again and again is the theme of nature. UUs across the board seem to be concerned about and interested in nature, the environment, and ecology. For many, nature is both an expression, as well as a location, of their spirituality and spiritual practices. This emergent theme might be considered a unifying theme in the congregation. Many also spoke of the beauty and natural setting of our building, while others expressed appreciation for the building space as one that houses art and music. Again, these discussions revealed the complexities of, and even overlaps in, expression regarding spirituality, spiritual potential, and spiritual practice. While not always overt, those who mentioned the UUFA as an appreciated space of music and the arts at times implied a connection to the spiritual potential as represented in the space and the practices undertaken therein.

Community as spiritual space

- I feel it is based in the community.
- My definition of spirituality is making the world a better place through community.

Another theme that emerged throughout most responses is that of community. Again, this theme is taken up elsewhere in this report. However, I choose to make mention of it in this section as often there seemed to be a powerful, and potentially spiritual, significance to the importance of community, community building, community participation, and nurturance. There was great value placed in community as a concept, a practice, and a material manifestation of fellowship.

In terms of fellowship and community, there were many references to women's groups, potlucks, and even the Christian Affinity group. These groups in particular seem to be feeding a need that many in the congregation experience in terms of spirituality and/or community. These social gatherings seem to offer relational opportunities and practices that are meaning-making and place-making. They offer the space for UU identity formation and group formation and, perhaps most importantly, seem to represent a manifestation of our congregational values.

Gender and spirituality

- [I] attend the women's spirituality group and find this very meaningful.
- The UU is the only religiously affiliated space within which [I] can situate myself as a

woman and a feminist ... [I] believe it is a space in which it is safe to be open. It is respectful to, for, and about women. [I] attribute some of this directly to Brian.

Intellectual exchange as spiritual

Some members expressed their interest in discussing and exploring liberal theologies and even spirituality and how to apply identified values in the everyday. While some respondents expressed a connection between the intellectual and the spiritual, most seemed especially interested in thinking about and discussing liberal theologies and even spirituality.

Place

In terms of place, many UUs commented on the beauty of the new building. Some expressed concern that the same people seem to take responsibility for many of the tasks at the UUFA, including maintenance-related responsibilities. Also, many expressed an appreciation for the aesthetics of the building and that which goes on within.

An overwhelming number of participants commented on parking as a need in terms of place/space. Interestingly, many expressed concern that the lack of parking was a detriment to attendance and particularly to new attendees. The parking issue was most always referenced in connection with concerns for accessibility. Members are concerned that we be accessible to any and all interested in learning about us, as well as to those interested and committed to attending regularly. This concern is directly linked to the valuing of creating and maintaining community.

UUFA Place in the Community

I am including the idea of the UUFA's place in the community as a theme this section of our report. I recognize that community is a theme being explored elsewhere, but a close read of responses reveals an interest and concern on behalf of our membership for the place of our congregation in our community. Importantly, the representation of the UUFA is understood to the responsibility of both individual UUs and of the minister.

Many participants expressed a real appreciation for the "place" of the UUFA in our community. These same respondents expressed an awareness and appreciation for Brian's representative presence in the greater community. Others noted the place of individual UUs in the community whose work on behalf of social justice is visible and representative of our congregational values. Interestingly, there were some who said we needed to align our stated interests in social justice with action and greater visibility in our community. Again, I make reference to these responses because respondents indicated that there is a place for our congregation in our community.

Spirituality – Place

- The Fellowship needs to be both a place for social action and a quiet place for those of us who need refilling.
- It is important for this family to be involved in a community that respects all people, the environment, and other cultures/religions.

The UUFA represents a vital connection between place and practice—and for some, spirituality—and active membership through fellowship, community-building, and social action.

Implications

- We need to foster opportunities for those who see the Fellowship as their spiritual home and are not finding their individual needs being met. Brian's Build Your Own Theology program was very successful. We need to continue developing programming that meets the needs of the congregation.
- Parking is seen as a major issue. Beyond meeting the needs of current members, parking is seen as a hurdle to growth. Members have a lot of pride for the Fellowship. They feel that if it is easy and welcoming for more people to attend, the Fellowship will grow. Additional parking is a means to attract more members.
- Many people come to the Fellowship for the community it brings. Many things unite the membership. We need to do more all-congregational events.
- Social Justice is very important to who we are as UUs. Several groups work well in this area, and many individuals are working hard in the community. The AMOS project is highly supported by respondents. This, too, is tied to growth. The more we are identified as a community of justice, the more attractive we become to new members.
- The arts are appreciated and respected by the Fellowship. There is a desire for more diversity with the music program. Many felt a need for more structure and funding to be directed toward music.
- Several respondents would like more discussion on how to be or talk about UUism.
- Sunday programs are a big draw and very successful. There is still a desire to mix up the lay-led services. We need new faces.
- We have several creative tensions within the Sunday program. More Brian vs. more variety with outside speakers; more discussion vs. less.
- Overall, people are happy with the minister. We need to keep an eye on burnout of the minister, staff, and volunteers.
- When discussing Brian, the only major issue surrounds his teaching at ISU. Need was expressed for better communicating the positive impacts of this venture.
- We need to continue to vary programming outside of Sunday morning. Change things up to make the programs more viable.
- We should continue the shared structure among minister and members of the congregation.
- Lack of formal adult education is a problem.
- Potlucks are very important in building community. Continue to strengthen this activity.