



Some Themes from our Congregation's Sheltering Flame Service, February 4, 2014

These reflections are an attempt to summarize repeated ideas generated during our January 19, 2014 Sheltering Flame planning service. With prompts people wrote on cards, some looking back at meaningful experiences within our congregation and others imagined what might be. Similar observations or suggestions arose in multiple categories.

This summary is impressionistic. While similar comments were not coded and counted, attributions of comments to "we", "many", or "some", are rough approximations of the frequency of repeated observations. It is best to read the full transcript.

Values and Principles

Congregants' observations echo our USNF mission statement and UUA principles. People value our principles and appreciate when we act upon them, especially in welcoming newcomers, providing help to each other, and acting together on behalf of social justice and the environment in the larger community. Some wish to do more.

Several mention feeling nourished and appreciative of the inspiration, encouragement, friendships, and support by the congregation and help from other members. Some value the experience of helping and sharing. Connections between us are important, especially when we learn and serve together through small group tasks, Small Group Ministry, adult education, coffee hour, and social events. More opportunities like this would help us build and sustain our connections.

It takes intentional effort to welcome newcomers and help make meaningful connections. It sometimes takes outreach to people we haven't seen in a while. Two wrote about appreciating our differences and trusting each other's intentions.

Some speak of being called to their higher selves by worship or the encouragement of other members. Worship services, including our music, are sources of inspiration and renewal.

Covenant, Connection, and Community

People appreciate being welcomed into the congregation, finding a spiritual home here. Many have made their deepest connections and best learn to know each other through close encounters in small groups: Small Group Ministry, committees, working groups, social action projects, adult education, Welcoming Congregation class, RE teaching, social events, and gatherings around food. More small-group opportunities like this would be welcome. One suggested a bereavement group and another mentioned monthly brown-bag lunches with the minister.

Several suggested that a single worship service would enhance our community. Two suggested that members contribute and the minister read from the pulpit "we hold in our hearts..." messages so we're aware of needs or notable events in people's lives. Other individual suggestions for services include: more lay participation in services, large print order of service, be attentive to elders' needs, and shift the community greeting to earlier in the service.



People feel nurtured and appreciate help from others when in need. Those who help, describe a deep satisfaction from providing service to others. Suggestions include: reach out to invite people into volunteer service and reach out to those whom we haven't seen in services for a while.

We value our principle of respecting everyone's self-worth. We are urged to value each other, be respectful, tolerant, non-judgmental of our differences, and to be intentional about our covenant with each other.

Renewal

Many wrote of the importance of religious education, of helping our children and youth safely learn and grow. We value the presence of young people and are moved by their insights. We want young people to feel at home here. Most who have taught or mentored in our RE program found it rewarding – some said it called them to their higher selves. It's a joy dedicate the children and watch them grow into their full selves with worthy values.

We wish for a welcoming, vital, and sustainable RE program. Suggestions include: mix things up more, teacher training, a simpler sustainable program, and lighter demands on parents.

We wish to welcome more young families with children, college students, and young adults to share our community. Family breakfasts, dinners, and family-oriented social action projects help.

We value adult education programs and some mentioned transformative experiences. Suggestions include: book groups, spiritual journaling, talks and films, meditation, short seminars, art projects and exhibits, and concerts. Suggestions for services include: diversity in music, visual art, and dance.

Some wrote of their personal renewal here, how the music, sermons, poetry, volunteer service, insights from others, and adult education programs have been sources of inspiration, renewal, and refuge. We appreciate being invited to think and feel more deeply. Intellectual and spiritual challenges are welcome.

Sacred Roots

We appreciate our history. We love our beautiful, historic building, yet are aware of its significant limitations: limited space for programs, meetings, social gatherings; traditional and formal raised dais and pulpit; and fixed seating. A few suggestions range from simply acknowledging its limitations to greening our building systems, repainting the walls, reconfiguring the great hall, or acquiring additional space or an alternative building.

We wish for effective stewardship, generous membership that yields adequate funds to fairly compensate our staff and fund our programs. We want long-term sustainable finances and to live within our means. Folks value their volunteer leadership and service and hope others step up to do so as well.



Sacred Action

Most congregants' notes stressed the value of participating in social justice and climate action work. It is important and rewarding work that strengthens connections among us, extends our principles into the world, and makes a difference. Many referenced specific initiatives: climate change action, our partner church, Interfaith Help Fund, Cot Shelter, LGBT awareness, Pride March, gay marriage campaign, disability awareness and accessibility, Food Bank, Mitten Tree, immigration policy, Haiti Support, violence and substance abuse prevention, Tree House, Hot Chocolate Run, and the Midnight Café. Some wished for more sustained congregation-wide effort. Some wanted more collaboration with other organizations. Others noted their own need to step up and become engaged in the work.

Others saw sacred action as the caring for each other within our religious community. Folks wrote that it is personally rewarding to be helpful. Those receiving help were appreciative and felt nurtured.

The Spaces Between

Some repeated observations include: the value of hymn singing together, appreciation for diversity in worship services, appreciation for support received,

Repeated suggestions: a single Sunday service, meditation sessions, continued support our RE program, and a more welcoming RE program. Other individual suggestions include: breakfasts featuring social justice leaders, lay-service leader training, internet bulletin board, more lay-led or collaborative services, guest ministers in summer services, sacred dance, and more explicit expectations for volunteer service.