



A Brighter Beacon
Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence (USNF)
Strategic Plan 2015-2018

Approved by the Board of Trustees on March 20, 2014

Introduction: A Greater Kindling

We are a sheltering chalice, and we are a beacon. Our light burns no matter the circumstances. Such hope and inspiration is visible in light and dark. It reaches into our congregation and outwardly to the community as a balm and as inspiration. It is a light for the dispossessed and a guide for social change. That beacon is our heritage and history, and is our immutable mission. Our job is to keep the flame burning. Our greater calling—here, today, and anew--is to kindle a brighter beacon.

We are strong and poised to grow

We are a congregation ripe for change. After a long transition, we have an accomplished settled minister and renewed energy. A sustaining core of congregants is invested in, and well served by our Society. Congregants feel stable. Sunday worship services comfort, move, and inspire, balancing head with heart, sanctuary with call to action, and tradition with innovation. Our religious education program has inspired generations of youth grounded in UU principles. Our social justice work has made a real difference in Northampton and surrounding communities. Our music is inspiring. We continually welcome visitors seeking a spiritual community, religious education, and shared values.

We have turned our attention to outreach and our future. Newer members report they feel welcome and their expectations are being realized. We want to be good stewards of our legacy for future generations. We are open to change and welcome new members and lay leaders. We are well positioned to grow again.

The resource challenge

Yet, like most Unitarian Universalist churches, our congregation is shrinking. Our congregational demographics indicate an aging membership with too few younger people among us to grow into lay leadership and generous stewardship. We are missing a generation of young families and emerging leaders. Our region's population is aging and decreasing, and there is a national trend of diminished interest in religion. While our median and average pledges are up, the number of pledging households is down, and we continue to draw unsustainable amounts from our legacy fund. Without intervention, the congregation will diminish. With a commitment to balance our spending with money raised, we can avoid an otherwise inevitable downward spiral that could lead to the congregation's disappearance within the lifetimes of our young children.

A thorough and visionary response

Against this backdrop, the USNF trustees realized we needed a strategic plan. A strategic task force was formed, tasked to work with Rev. Bush, the board, leadership, and the congregation to gather data and craft a three-year plan.

We started with a deep analysis of the USNF today. We conducted 42 in-depth interviews, a congregation-wide survey (156 respondents), and a special Sheltering Flame service. We reviewed qualitative and quantitative data from the last decade, and completed an environmental analysis. All of these results are shared on the Strategic Plan section of our website.

This plan and its lists of ideas are built on those findings and the next step in our resolve to action. As we continue to engage trustees, committees, and members in further discernment, this plan becomes a truly collective effort, reflecting the breadth and depth of our society.

Generations of congregations have sought the balance between the pastoral and the prophetic, or taking care of parishioners and taking care of the world. While this plan addresses both values, it recognizes that both take energy and resources. For that reason we pay as much attention to gathering resources as we do to reviewing how they are used.

Considering the quality of input to date, we are confident that this plan, when reviewed, refined, and approved, will guide us in the short-term and solidly position us in the long-term, fueling the flame of our mission, principles and values.

Our Mission

The Unitarian Society of Northampton and Florence is an inclusive and welcoming intergenerational congregation of diverse spiritual beliefs and practices. Our mission is to build a caring community where children and adults can safely learn and grow, where we are supported and challenged on life's journeys, called to service and to our higher selves, and inspired to better our world.

Our Principle and Values

We are an intentional, welcoming, covenantal community, an independent congregation with a long tradition of liberal faith and committed social action. We are members of the Unitarian Universalist Association and are guided by the seven UUA principles.

Long-range Goals & Accompanying Strategies

We strive to achieve the following long-range goals as a gathered people: Inspiration & Renewal, Community & Covenant, Sacred Action, and Sacred Roots. Our strategic plan priorities —concerning religious formation and community connection, social justice, sustainability and governance—support these long-range goals. Below are the four goals, followed by our four strategic priorities.

Goal I Inspiration & Renewal : Gather in communal reflection and religious experience without doctrine.

- **Worship:** Offer worship services that inspire, challenge, and renew with words, music, and community.
- **Religious Education:** Provide a renewed, welcoming and responsive RE program for all kids, youth, families and adults of all ages

Goal II - Community & Covenant

Welcome all to celebrate common values, respect differences, and be present for each other.

- **Welcome:** Assure that visitors feel welcome and newcomers have multiple pathways to connect.
- **Covenant:** Assure that we respect the worth and dignity of every member, friend, visitor, and child.
- **Pastoral Care:** Assure that members are cared for.
- **Communications:** Keep members informed and share our good work with the public.

Goal III - Sacred Action

Make a real difference as a progressive religious voice and force.

- **Social Justice:** Tap our members' passion for social justice and outreach.
- **Climate Action/environmental stewardship:** Make this a priority.
- **Partnerships:** Engage in local and national partnership to extend our reach.

Goal IV - Sacred Roots

Honor our history and adapt to changes to sustain our community for future generations.

- 1) **Stewardship:** Establish a culture of generosity of time, talent and resources to fund our mission and live within our means.
- 2) **Governance:** Continue to develop and strengthen our governance structure.
- 3) **Human Resources:** Sustain appropriate staffing level and configuration to effectively manage programs.
- 4) **House and Property:** Sustain our building and grounds in service of our mission.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #1

Meet people's need for spiritual connection, nourishment, learning, and service in a more robust way.

- Re-imagine religious education and adult education, better integrating them with worship, pastoral care and newcomer connections through a community-building initiative that:
 - Welcomes and integrates newcomers, especially young families and young people;
 - Connects children, youth, their families, and other adults in our community; and
 - Enhances programs for all ages that connect and engage us in learning, growth, and outreach.
- Move to one worship service at 10:00 am.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #2

Congregation will have a stronger and more visible social justice impact.

- Develop a social justice action plan that integrates Social Justice with the rest of the congregation.
- Develop robust social justice communication plan including regular updates on work and events both in and outside USNF.
- Build on members' enthusiasm for environmental and other causes.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #3

Develop and implement a three-year financial sustainability plan to fund our mission and live within our means through effective stewardship that yields sustainable legacy fund withdrawals and a balanced budget within 3 years.

- Develop a three-year, top-level fiscal plan that parallels and supports the strategic plan and achieves a balanced budget by FY2018.
- Identify people and resources to help us develop a robust, year-round stewardship that establishes a culture of generosity of time, talent and treasure so that we may fund our mission and live within our means, using an outside consultant if knowledge is not within the congregation.

STRATEGIC PRIORITY #4

Strengthen our commitment to a culture of living our mission with intention, through continued work on governance, communication, and right relations.

- Create a process to help us monitor, assess, and ensure that this plan is followed, updated, and renewed on a regular basis.
- Revise our society's by-laws to match our current governance structure and update best practices.
- Develop and live out a congregational covenant of right relations.