

November 25, 2005

To: Committees in the Direct Ministry Cluster  
From: Sunday Morning Program Committee  
Subject: Report results of the survey

In April, 2005, the Sunday Morning Program Committee (SMPC) distributed a fifteen-question survey to each member and friend of the fellowship to get feedback about Sunday morning programs. The questionnaire was sent to inactive members and individuals who no longer attend Sunday services, as well as to members who attend regularly. 97 individuals completed the survey. This represents about 60% of an average Sunday's attendance. (Total attendance at two-service Sundays in May 2005 averaged 158. Total attendance on two-service Sundays in September averaged 154.)

Although we hoped to get feedback from individuals who are no longer coming to Sunday services, only one individual who "almost never" attends fellowship responded to our survey. Of those who did respond, over half reported that they attend nearly every week and another quarter of the respondents stated that they attend at least twice a month. The survey clearly reflects the views of individuals who attend Sunday services on a regular basis. While it can not be viewed as representing members and friends of the fellowship who seldom appear on Sundays, it does capture the opinions of a majority of congregants who are regular Sunday morning attendees.

Five of the survey questions yielded data that could be quantitatively analyzed, but the other ten questions were open-ended questions that asked for written comments. These questions produced pages and pages of comments that required a more detailed, qualitative analysis. In September a subcommittee was established to analyze the survey results and report back to the SMPC. The subcommittee met several times, exchanged email drafts of the report, and agreed on a draft of this report that was presented and discussed at a special three-hour meeting of the SMPC on October 8, 2005. This report is the result of that meeting. This report consists of three major sections. The first section is a concise statement of the SMPC's four general recommendations; the second section provides details and specific

recommendations for action by the program committee and the fellowship; and the third section is a discussion of the survey results arranged by four themes: community, challenges, spirituality, and calls for change.

### **Recommendations in brief**

1. Encourage more participation in Sunday programs by a broader spectrum of the Fellowship.
2. Build on program ideas that were suggested by survey respondents.
3. Implement small changes that were suggested by survey respondents.
4. Improve the experience of all persons attending Sunday morning programs.

### **Recommendations in detail**

This section provides specific actions that can be or have already been implemented followed by a discussion of our findings in general.

#### **1. Encourage more participation in Sunday programs by a broader spectrum of the Fellowship.**

In part, this recommendation asks that the program committee examine our current policy: the “program committee members only (or mostly) plan, facilitate, and lead the programs.”

We’d like to show that we are listening to what people want by pulling program ideas from the survey and asking people who are not on the committee to help with planning and participating in programs. These were some of the ideas we discussed.

- Encourage the facilitator to invite people (such as families, youth, and non-program committee members) to participate in the service by reading opening/closing words, lighting the chalice, or conducting another part of the service.
- Ask people to tell us what is important to them about the Fellowship.
- Include more interactive programs such as the discussions that are part of this fall’s series.
- Encourage people to prepare and present programs in which they share their personal stories, experiences, and knowledge.
- Encourage people to suggest program ideas based on what they find meaningful.
- Be alert to people in the fellowship and in the larger community who are engaged in interesting work, who have had noteworthy experiences, or who can speak about the spiritual nature of something they enjoy, such as poetry, song, a hobby, or an event.

#### **2. Build on program ideas that were suggested by survey respondents.**

People were explicit about what they didn’t like and about what they want more of. Some people made specific suggestions for programs while others indicated general areas of interest (please see specific suggestions that can be found in the survey results which are on the web at <http://uufames.org/archive/survey2005.html>). We talked about the possibility of starting an adult discussion group that would meet between services. This, perhaps, would meet the need

for more discussion noted by nearly one third of our respondents. We also talked about developing programs around one or more of the arts (e.g., poetry, music, drama). We realize the importance of reviewing what we've done in the past along with comments and suggestions from the Fellowship to help us plan meaningful programs.

### **3. Implement small changes that were suggested by survey respondents.**

People offered specific suggestions, some of which are or will be easy to implement.

- Read aloud only those announcements that are *not* printed in the order of service.
- Construct a suggestion/feedback/idea box that is opened each month and brought to the program committee.
- Put out more chairs in general, but especially on Sundays when the children start downstairs.
- Locate a less dirge-like “children’s benediction” that is easy to sing and/or present several songs that can be rotated.
- Incorporate a way of including silent milestones.

As we discussed these changes, we decided that processes for implementing the first three suggestions were either in the works or were within the purview of the SMPC to initiate and carry out, notably the suggestion/feedback/idea box. We have communicated with the nuts and bolts folks about chairs, and we recognize that others have already begun to address the way we send our young people on their way.

In terms of incorporating silent milestones, we have talked about possibilities that include a sand table with candles, a row of votives on the window ledges on the east side of the room, and having the person “doing” milestones light a candle and not say anything—this would be in addition to the final “spoken and unspoken” candle.

We suggest that changes be considered in light of “best practices,” such as those described on the *Unitarian Universalist Best Practices: Chalice, Joys and Concerns, and other Sunday Service Components* website at <http://www.thegreatstory.org/UU-practices.html>.

### **4. Improve the experience of all persons attending Sunday morning programs.**

The presence and participation of children in Sunday morning programs was a theme throughout the comments, so we looked at that issue from several points of view. At the present time, children are “down” every other Sunday during the school year. In our discussions, we talked about what happens in services where children are present. Specifically, we wondered what the children get by hearing announcements, opening words, and a story. Do the children get an accurate picture of how the adult fellowship functions? Would it be better to have children stay for the milestones? Do we build better intergenerational relationships by

having the children present at Sunday services? How does the presence of the children impact program content and the Sunday morning experience of adults in attendance?

Although many respondents expressed satisfaction with the status quo, a number of survey respondents indicated *a desire for some change or alteration* in the current arrangement. Some respondents wanting change indicated that they disliked the current arrangement and /or would reduce the number of Sundays that children are down. Many comments addressed concerns about improving the adult experience on Sunday morning. Some respondents expressed a desire for fewer stories, commented on the seating problems, or noted that it is disruptive when the children leave.

Addressing the chair problems that result when children attend the service and minimizing the disruption as the children leave would greatly improve the overall experience that adults have when children are present.

Another important concern is the use of stories. On a question evaluating program elements, one in four people indicated a preference for fewer stories. Respondents have linked the inclusion of stories in the program to the presence of children in the services which seems to suggest a tendency for facilitators and /or speakers to assume a need for a story just “because” the children are there. Some respondents suggested that we permit children to experience a “regular” service, rather than services changed because of their presence. We would recommend that the program format be varied on Sundays when the children are down so that it does not always consist of an adult telling a story to the children. On some Sundays, an older child might read a story to the congregation. On other Sundays, the children might teach the adults a song they have recently learned. We might also experiment with having children stay down for milestones and give them an opportunity to share milestones with adults.

The decision to have children down was made several years ago after extensive discussion. At the time the decision was made, it was agreed that this practice would be evaluated at a later date to see how it was working out. This promised evaluation has not occurred. After several years of actual experience with this format, members of the congregation see both positives and negatives in this practice. The program committee suggests that we continue the present arrangement through the end of the current school year, but we encourage that a more extensive evaluation be conducted to determine if modifications are needed.. A final decision on this

matter, obviously, is one that would involve the committees in the Direct Ministry Cluster, the UUFA Board, and the entire congregation.

### **General Discussion**

On the whole, the responses to the survey suggest a broad consensus that we, as a fellowship, are doing well. The data from the quantitative questions reflect that people come to Sunday services (84% at least twice a month), that the Sunday morning topics are somewhat or highly relevant to “my life” (96%), and that people are at least somewhat satisfied with Sunday services (87%; 49% very satisfied, 37% somewhat satisfied).

On the whole, the survey results suggest that we—the program committee and the fellowship as a community—are on the right track. Comments like, “just keep up the great variety,” “the mere fact that you are soliciting response is a very good thing,” “Yes, there are some things I would like to see changed, but by and large I enjoy coming on Sunday,” and “Keep emphasis on music.” We believe that written comments/feedback can be grouped into themes—community, challenges, spirituality, and calls for change—and we address those here.

**Community.** Whether people expressly mentioned that they come to the fellowship—and keep coming back—to find and be a part of community here or if respondents answered in ways that suggest how they experience community in the fellowship, the sense of community is pervasive and seems to be important to most of the respondents. In response to “What do you like best about Sunday morning programs?” people wrote, “connecting with people. Hearing each other’s stories,” “when a group-vibe is developed. When I feel that we all feel a spiritual grounding & when we are all connected,” “Fellowship-people,” and “sense of community.”

Naturally, some people viewed community as an important issue, but suggested that we could do a better job in terms of building and maintaining community. One person wrote, “I know it is a tough job, but we have to be more engaged as a community.” While the program committee can hold community building and maintenance as an ongoing goal, we need to share this goal with other committees and small groups to ensure that we remain effective in terms of sustaining the sense of affiliation for those who already feel “a part of.” At the same time, we—across the board—would do well to continue to be alert for ways to draw people into activities that have as part of their design to build community.

It is not big news that people feel “a part of” when they share of themselves and when they feel their contributions are valued. Finding the balance between putting people on the spot and

building an atmosphere of openness that promotes this kind of sharing ought to be an ongoing challenge.

**Challenges.** People mentioned both challenges that spur reflection on one’s own spiritual path and the UU “way” and challenges to transform what we believe into action taken both within the UUFA and the larger community. Some want more challenge: “Get some originality that stimulates thinking,” “I think we’ve developed a certain smugness about who we are and what we think. I’d like to see us develop a real journey—search—for our religious identity and personal beliefs,” and “more social justice issues, peace, and ethical issues would be good.” At the same time, some people seem to want challenges to take shape within a more UU-centric focus: “Too many programs reflect the personal views of the individual presenter and/or are irrelevant to the UU tradition. We ‘do our own thing’ too often.” And some people apparently want the focus to shift to more of Brian and less of the program committee: “I would like to hear the minister more often. I feel the program committee is assuming more duties usually expected of a minister.”

**Spirituality.** It seems safe to say that almost everyone wants program talks that come, as someone put it, “from the heart.” No one suggested that we have too much spirituality, but several people identify what might be called a “spirituality/rationality divide.” On the one hand, some people report that they think we are “too churchy” (“Let’s sing more lusty tunes”) while others indicate that we don’t include enough spiritually based programs. Some of these responses seemed to focus on Brian’s active participation (“sermons”) to impart more spirituality.

**Calls for change.** In some cases, these calls were suggestions that can be—and have been—implemented with some ease, such as choosing a different children’s benediction, reading aloud only those announcements that are not in the bulletin, and creating a way for people to provide feedback, such as a suggestion box. “Children downstairs” remains the area where the data support some kind of change or alteration in our present practice.

Some people perceive the program committee as “doing too much.” One respondent commented: “My problem is more that we continue to have the same people present a topic year after year after year. I know pretty much what will be said—presented—on these topics year after year.” The program committee intends to set a goal of inviting other fellowship members to take on some of the jobs now being done by program committee members. This

might be more difficult than simply doing it ourselves, but, in the long run, encouraging wider participation might enrich our programs, build skills and identify talents of the participants, and breathe freshness into the program planning process.

Finally, one of our members, after having studied the survey comments offered “something Ken Lane said once when he was on the program committee. He raised the question of whether UU’s always conceived of programs as giving the ‘audience’ what it thinks it wants rather than exhorting the ‘congregation’ to mend their lives, etc!”

The SMPC wholeheartedly thanks Carole Kazmierski for her efforts in keeping the importance of a survey before the committee, for drafting and circulating the survey, and for assisting in the analysis of responses. Thanks, too, to Chris White, who, as a new member of the SMPC and a new member of the fellowship, volunteered to take on the task of drafting this summary. And a final thanks to Sam Wormley, for the commitment and dedication he brings to the ongoing work of the program committee.