First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor
2006 Appreciative Inquiry Project (Sankofa Project)

Provocative Proposals

What is now proved was once imagined.
-William Blake-

Provocative Proposals in the Appreciative Inquiry Process

Participants in the analysis phase of the Appreciative Inquiry Process: Members of the Board of Trustees, Program Council, Ministerial Search Committee and Transition Team.

In the Spring of 2006, the "Sankofa Squad" collected information about what our community values most at First UU, why we appreciate our involvement here and what our hopes are for the future of the congregation. This information came from the responses to about 350 one-on-one interviews conducted between pairs of First UU members, friends and staff.

Once the interviews were complete, the Transition Team wrote up summaries of the information from the surveys and then leadership groups analyzed the information and identified 5 "themes" in the responses. The five themes were then distilled and grouped to describe our appreciation for First UU **Community**, **Social Action Projects**, **Quest for Spiritual Development**, **Resources** and **Culture**. The theme-grouped summaries are available in a separate document.

The document you are reading was the next step in the process. The Appreciative Inquiry books describe this as creating "provocative proposals". Small groups took the thematic descriptions and the combined lists of wishes for the future of the congregation and used them to create statements about First UU's future. You might want to think of these statements as the responses to an appreciative inquiry 4, 5 or 10 years from now. The statements in this document are written as if they are already true. They are meant to provoke thought about our future directions, our individual involvements, our needs for programs, etc. Do not worry about the smaller details of some of the statements in this document; some are specific for illustration while others are more general aspirations of the congregation. Some are true now, others will take years to accomplish.

While you read this document, please consider YOUR role in making these aspirations come true. What can you do as an individual to help our community become more welcoming to visitors? What new activity can *your* committee propose to energize and involve more of the congregation? What suggestions can you pass on to the Program Council or Board? Which piece of the First UU future do you own?

Introduction

The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor is a strong and energetic **community** of liberal religious thinkers and do-ers. We value our commitment to social justice and find it most effective to come together as a group to pursue **social outreach** projects. We support each other and inspire each other in our individual **religious quests**. We are stewards to many wonderful **resources** that support our large selection of congregational activities. We all contribute to and benefit from the stimulating and complex **culture** that we create together at First UU.

1- The First UU COMMUNITY

At First UU we "do not check our brains at the door" but enter a place where we can "address things we can't address elsewhere." We find involvement with others who share our liberal religious values exciting and energizing.

Everyone arrives at our church feeling "welcomed, accepted and fitted into the community". Everyone says hello, everyone does their part to make visitors feel at home. Every person is part of the ministry here.

Anyone walking into our building can see what an active and caring community we are just by looking around. The building is bright and cheerful and well cared for. There are rotating displays of artwork on the walls. We have special displays of ongoing social outreach projects and religious education projects. The "Caring Board" in the office gives updates on members in the hospital or otherwise in need of support.

Visitors take note of the prominently displayed informative pamphlets describing each of the First UU ministries to children, middle schoolers, high schoolers, college students, young adults and seniors. They can see the children's crayons and fidget toys provided outside the sanctuary that welcome children to our services and ceremonies.

This is a place where adults and children alike develop life-long friendships, usually through their participation in small group activities and RE classes. One of the reasons for the strong feeling of community here is the range of options we provide for contributing while learning from others, such as through teaching in the RE program. Our Membership Coordinator helps people find their niche in the congregation by keeping a database of all members along with their interests and talents and by helping to match individuals with opportunities to volunteer in the many aspects of service to the UU congregation and to the wider society.

The Membership Committee uses the database to maintain an annual record of the various ways each member has been involved in community-building groups and activities, as well as in the social action outreach projects described in section 2, or in the spiritual development opportunities in section 3, or in the leadership roles of stewardship in section 4.

For the annual Volunteer Appreciation ceremony, the member database helps us insure

that we recognize the previous year's contributions of every member to the life of the UU congregation and to the wider community.

Anyone in the congregation of any age has opportunity to join in small long-term covenant groups that are led by trained lay ministers.

Children, youth and adults all look forward to our two major fun and free all-family all-church activities. There is a family picnic on our grounds in the summer and a Game Night / Masked Ball held on New Years Eve.

We also sponsor fun events that draw in the larger Ann Arbor community as well, such as our community 'coffee house' nights that include music and sometimes folk dancing or other special activities.

We take advantage of our location near several universities and bring in local speakers, musicians and artists to broaden our perspectives.

We value our youth as the future of UUism. After completing the Coming of Age program, youth are increasingly involved in Sunday services and our intergenerational committees and classes. When high school students graduate, they are either welcomed into the campus ministry program if they will be living in the area or they are provided with membership in the "Church of the Younger Fellowship" to maintain their UU involvement via the Internet. The youth coordinator tracks email addresses and moderates a BLOG on the First UU web site that allows youth to stay in touch with UU friends across the country.

The ministers, the Membership Committee and the Membership Coordinator are all very much a part of our well-defined process of becoming a member -- from first visit to membership and beyond to group participation and mentoring into leadership roles. The Membership Committee provides a report at the end of each year showing number of visitors, new members, lost members, and the levels of involvement in groups and classes and in volunteer service both internal and external. We are proud of our member retention rate and the commitment and involvement of the large majority of our members. Despite our growth in membership, we provide enough opportunities to interact with and learn about each other that we all feel we are part of an intimate caring and supportive community.

2- OUR INVOLVEMENT IN SOCIAL ACTION PROJECTS

At the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor it is easy to learn about, understand, and lead or join others in social action efforts for peace and justice. Many of our projects are intergenerational -- young and old alike are encouraged to take active roles.

Every year, members of First UU pledge to contribute to the well being of the community, inside and out, through pledges of commitment to action by living out our UU principles through service.

The First UU Social Action leadership team works to match volunteer opportunities in the Ann Arbor / Ypsilanti community with individuals from First UU willing to put their principles in action. We have initiated a social justice outreach partnership project with a non-UU congregation in Ann Arbor so that we can learn from each other while working together for a local cause.

As part of its mission, First UU trains leaders for Social Action projects, providing an understanding of the relevant issues and the skills to address those issues.

Our commitments to Social Action leadership in our community have given us a high profile – We are known as the place to go for information on certain social projects.

Activities under the Social Action umbrella are interconnected with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and its regional branches (Heartland, etc.) and with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC) as well as local interfaith groups and other nonprofit organizations.

At the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor, current Social Action issues of the day and long term, hard to crack Social Action issues are all addressed.

3- OUR QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor is a beacon and beloved home for free thinkers old and young, for seekers from diverse backgrounds and lifestyles who quest for truth and meaning in life. All those who are interested in the depth dimension, whether from the outlook of humanism, as atheists or agnostics, theists, mystics, religious eclectics or from the perspective of a particular religious or spiritual tradition, feel welcome and are truly sustained in their individual journeys.

We are blessed with the compassionate and friendly leadership of a staff of ministers who bring us wisdom and experience, and great breadth and depth of spiritual and intellectual perspective. We have many trained lay leaders who support the work of the ministers, and augment the talents of the music and religious education staffs.

On Sundays we are inspired by our ‘celebrations of life’ in the sacred space of the beautiful sanctuary, chapels or in one of the spots set aside for worship on our land. Multiple service formats geared to both large and small groups provide for the variety of spiritual needs of the community. Services vary in that some are casual, some more formal, some highly participatory. There is an intentional focus on integrating older youth and young adults into some of the services, and our tradition of holding special intergenerational services continues. Varied music from our choirs, instrumental groups and solo performances, rituals, sermons, readings, meditations, small group discussions, and talents and wisdom shared from the heart by ministers and congregation members lift us up and carry us out to work in the world.

Lifespan religious education continues to be a cornerstone of our congregation. The highly trained religious education staff keeps us current with innovative, integrated and inspiring curricula for children, youth, and adults. On Sundays our beautiful, well-

equipped religious education wing and designated areas on our land are humming with children's and youth classes, worship, and other age-appropriate activities that explore our connection with the world, our religious heritage, other religions, and ourselves. We have a surfeit of eager, well-trained lay teachers and instructors, and a youth minister who addresses the special needs of our young people, with an emphasis on their transition to the adult UU world and fostering lifelong UU connections. Our campus ministry has expanded its outreach to college-age young adults who work in the community or attend any of several nearby universities. We sponsor a variety of on-campus worship and programmatic events. The college-age group is enriched by and in turn contributes to the life of the congregation.

Throughout the week our building and grounds are busy with activities where we continue our questing. Many small groups meet. There are women's and men's groups, meditation groups, rituals, small worship groups, discussion groups and study groups. We continue the tradition of holding 'forums' on Sundays and other days, where the public is invited and speakers, often from outside our congregation, share their expertise about timely issues or topics related to personal and spiritual growth. Small discussion groups are integrated as part of some of the forums. On 'adult education nights' our RE wing rooms are filled for the integrated curriculum of classes offered by our ministers, RE staff, and congregants who have special expertise in areas of interest. We also continue our designated family Religious Education nights where young and old can partake of a meal together and participate in a range of activities. Summertime brings camps on our grounds and at outside venues where various groups and families learn, worship and play together.

In all these ways, First UU is a community highly supportive of its members, in both diverse and common purpose, where we are nurtured and inspired to find our own spiritual truths and personal horizons.

4- STEWARDSHIP OF OUR RESOURCES

We are a congregation of stewards connecting to our land, finances, facility and most importantly to each other. The long term financial plan, with appropriate non operating sinking funds, and maintenance/renovation master plans are well funded through planned giving and membership required pledging.

Our facility and acreage are a destination point in S.E. Michigan for celebrations, concerts, retreats, conferences and other events. These events reflect our principles. The external community uses of our facilities are kept in balance with our own First UU programs. The community events provide additional income and assure that our excellent facilities see full use.

Our staff resources include a ministry and support staffs that are integrated into the programs of our congregation. Through their leadership congregant's talents are put to good use. Our staff is well managed and every member has a sense of her/his own ministry.

Our most valuable resource is a large and engaged congregation made up of individuals who all participate in several of the many activities offered at First UU.

We have a members and friends database available that allows us to select leaders, identify volunteer staff and understand and develop programs for members.

Resources that help us maintain communication at First UU include our excellent newsletter and web site and a communication tree based on our small group ministry. We can communicate any message to all members and friends within two days and have a response back to the leadership in four days.

5- OUR FIRST UU CULTURE

At the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor we respect the differing world views and beliefs of all members of our community. Our members and friends represent diversity in ethnic origin, sexual orientation, religious perspective, and socio-economic class. Our culture demonstrates an embrace of and a dynamic balance of both respect for the individual and a commitment to community, both the rational and the emotional, the objective and the subjective, the practical and the spiritual, the theistic and the humanistic, the sublime and the secular, the serious and the humorous, and the planned and the spontaneous.

We recognize ourselves and value others as unique, worthy, and powerful. We work alone and with others to achieve justice, equity and compassion in our relationships, institutions, community, and in the larger world. We are deepening and developing spiritually and are searching for truth and meaning freely and responsibly. We actively use the appropriate democratic processes in our personal relationships, in our groups, in the Congregation, and in the society. We act in sustainable ways. And each of us is accountable for our land, building and finances.

We have increased our understanding and connections with UU beliefs, world views, and principles to the point that all members know and can present the UU story and philosophy.

Our understanding of other spiritual traditions is being enhanced by an exchange program with local religious institutions. Four times a year, a visiting local religious leader delivers a message on the universal truths of his/her tradition. The visiting leader brings their own choir, teaches us a favorite hymn, and tells us about their typical order of service and in their religious traditions. In exchange, our UU minister preaches to the neighbor congregation on what UU's value in our tradition.

The congregation exemplifies excellence as the standard for performance of ministry, staff, lay leadership and volunteers and we have processes to assess and evaluate all its programs based on this standard.

[Note on Culture: Culture is our learned world view, values, principles, and standards that we use and are acceptable in a community. The essence of culture is not only what is visible on the surface, it is the shared ways in which we understand and interpret the world; a shared system of meanings. It dictates what we pay attention to, how we act, and what we value. It is also a set of values and principles, the behavioral expectations and standards we have for ourselves and each other.]