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

Thematic Descriptions

Overview

Thematic Descriptions 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**.

This document contains the five thematic descriptions of the interview responses. This document was then used as the input (along with the "make three wishes" responses) to the final document in the analysis phase, the Provocative Proposals.

In contrast to the Provocative Proposals that describe our aspirations for the future, these thematic descriptions describe the congregation as it is now or as it was in the past. As you read this, keep in mind that this is a collection of individual viewpoints. These viewpoints may not represent your experience in the congregation, but reveal what some members have found of particular value at First UU Ann Arbor over the years.

Thematic Description
Social Action
First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor
Findings from Appreciative Inquiry - Sankofa Data

In keeping with Unitarian Universalism's strong emphasis on **ethical behavior** over theology, the members of the First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor are proud to say regarding Social Action,

"We walk the talk."

We are proud of our efforts to try to correct social injustice, to value our interdependent web of existence, and to work toward peace.

The interviews indicate **we like choices**. In the Ann Arbor community and at the First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor in particular, we have a multitude of committees advocating for or against a variety of issues.

We walk the talk **by educating our members about issues**. Each month we have reserved one Sunday to present a 75 minute Forum on a Social Action topic or issue sponsored by one of the Social Action committees and scheduled through the Social Action Advisory Council, to educate ourselves on issues and current efforts on the topic. In addition each group is invited to present a three minute Living Our Principles address to the congregation during the Sunday Service. Newsletter items and web page postings are also used to keep the membership informed and a table is set up in the Social Hall after each Sunday Service to provide face to face informational contact.

We walk the talk **by providing opportunities to contribute blood, sweat, and tears, and money to fight injustice and inequities.**
The UU Annual Red Cross Blood Drive provides an opportunity for a cross section of the congregation to participate. One year the Islamic Center of Ann Arbor and First UU cosponsored the Blood Drive.
Our yearly house building project through Habitat for Humanity and our annual October Interfaith organizationally sponsored CROP Walk to raise money and awareness in the fight against poverty are popular and successful visible efforts to engage in community outreach.

We walk the talk by providing opportunities **to build links to the external community** as well as opportunities to connect through **community building within the First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor**. As of January, 2006 we are sharing the collection plate. The first Sunday collections of each month will the donated to a worthy cause other than ourselves. The four nonprofit organizations chosen are: The Corner Health Center, Friends in Deed, the Packard Community Clinic, and Peace Neighborhood Center.

Our RE program has long ***walked the talk*** by engaging our **youth in Social Action projects** like helping to serve meals at a Homeless Shelter to building homes in Appalachia through Habitat for Humanity to walking in the CROP Walk or running a Relay for Life to promote cancer research.

Occasionally the congregation is encouraged to focus on **one theme or project** like the Blood Drive or the Katrina Relief project or a UU Statement of Conscience issue like prison reform or global warming.

We walk the talk **through leadership** - be it l**ay leadership, ministerial example and exhortation, or links to the UU/UUSC network.**
The Social Action Advisory Council is a new wrinkle in **lay leadership** and organizational structure in our endeavor to support the numerous Social Action efforts offered in our large sized congregation. Four officers and four liaisons to the four categories of committees have just begun to explore ways to strengthen our Social Action program at the First UU.

We have had strong **ministerial leadership** as well at the First UU in the area of Social Action. Our minister for 25 years led by example and Sunday sermons --exhortations to show the need and encourage participation in the ongoing struggle for social equality, justice and peace.

The UUA and the UUSC are providing the First UU Congregation with **links** for a more denominational approach to combating national and world wide issues.

We walk the talk - In a stressful, frenetic culture like ours, there are immense pressures on everyone's time - especially free, volunteer time. Fortunately, at our First UU of Ann Arbor,

The spirit of this congregation is love,
And service is its law.
This is our covenant with each other:
To dwell together in peace,
To search for truth in love,
And to help one another.

The continuous task of leadership in the area of social action is to recognize UU's who contribute as **witnesses to liberal values** in the community as private individuals, and to identify and match First UU members with volunteer opportunities that are personally rewarding, of worth to the community, and a living testament to our Unitarian Universalist liberal values.

June 12, 2006

Thematic Description
SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND QUEST
First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor
Findings from Appreciative Inquiry - Sankofa Data

Spiritual Development and Quest at First UU

We appreciate the diverse opportunities for spiritual and personal questing and growth within our congregation. Sunday services are well attended, inspirational and thought provoking. Many congregants site sermons as a large part of their attraction to First UU. The sermons , music, meditation, and rituals large and small help bring us together in spiritual and intellectual growth. Lifespan religious education involves children, youth, and adults in lifelong learning. Our Coming of Age program is vibrant and growing, with over 20 young
UUs graduating this year. We also enjoy ways of inquiry and worship that go beyond these traditional UU programs.

The RE program provides age-appropriate curricula that explore our connection with the world, our religious heritage, other religions in the world, and ourselves. Our Whole Lives is offered in the 8th grade, and this year was offered for 5th and 1st grades, as well. All classes are taught by congregants. Coming of Age, also offered to 8th graders,
links each young person with an adult mentor from the congregation. Together, in a group, with their mentor, and by themselves, they are challenged to think for themselves, to develop their own credo, and to present it to the congregation. Ministers, staff, and lay members lead a variety of adult-education classes that help us find our own beliefs, explore our roots, and to develop new paths to spiritual discovery.

The YRUU (high school) group explores and puts into action our UU principles. Each year, they create and present a unique Sunday service, which is always entertaining and inspiring. In 2006, they hosted a youth leadership "con", and 20 members attended General Assembly. A parent expressed pleasure "seeing my son enjoy going to GA."

Our land nurtures earth-centered worship, whether it be in the sweat lodge, in the grove, or by individual communion with nature. During their initiation weekend, the Coming of Age youths each engage in a solitary vision quest on the land. Our seasonal rituals group observes "pagan" celebrations such as Imbolc, Beltane, and the solstices, with ceremonies open to the entire congregation.

Many of us find it easier to quest in small groups, such as the "Cakes for the Queen of Heaven" women's groups, men's circles, and Wisdom Seeker groups. The annual women's and men's retreats provide another avenue to growth. One woman said "Cakes was a healing process," and another "Cakes was exciting, to explore feminine spirituality." A man found that the "Men's retreat showed how I could improve my life with my family and the world." The Between Times Sacred Song group meets on Sunday mornings to share in performing music as an avenue to worship. The annual family camp brings together 1st UU families to play, explore, and worship.

Twice a month, on Friday evening, many of us gather for RE night. After a shared meal, a variety of activities engage the whole family. A movie or talk might stimulate discussion about "what's important in life [or the] meaning of things." Some might celebrate the solstice. Other activities

such as crafts or a "coffee house" highlighting the talents of our musicians bring us together in shared community.

We are inspired to discover and explore old and new ways of finding our spiritual truths; and of expanding our personal horizons. We have found that we can be a community of individuals in diverse and common purpose.

June 14, 2006

Thematic Description
RESOURCES
First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor
Findings from Appreciative Inquiry - Sankofa Data

We Appreciate Our Bountiful First UU RESOURCES

Our congregation values our wealth of resources: our excellent physical facility and its surrounding grounds, our large pool of talented, caring people, and our thriving surrounding community that offers several nearby universities, several interfaith groups and a wide range of community activities.

In January of 1999 we moved from our cramped quarters to a much more spacious, light and cheerful architect-designed building on 45 acres of undeveloped land. We have continued to grow our membership and our staff over the subsequent years adding new talents and skills and helping hands to our people resources.

Our larger building has allowed us to expand our religious education classes and our programs and activities. We have space for our community 'forums' and space to rent to diverse community groups. We have three beautiful chapels to provide us with gathering places and sacred space.

Our Land Use Committee developed a site master plan for our large tract of land and we have already put the land to many interesting uses. We have built trails, set aside a memorial garden, established a prairie, held "sweat lodges", planted gardens, camped-out, fed birds and held nature based rituals on the land. The land is a special focus for many of us with interests in gardening, nature, environmentalism or nature-based spirituality.

Our congregation is also rich in talent and energy. Our skilled staff works together well providing a range of skills in administration, religious education, art, music and much more. Our now large congregation has a deeper pool of volunteers that offer skills in a dizzying array of areas: organizing events, making coffee, developing our web site, teaching classes in astronomy, leading discussions on Middle East politics, writing, performing, pounding nails… Our interviews generated a 12 page list of ways people contribute! Our walls are adorned with artwork in a rotating exhibit of works from the First UU congregation. We draw on talent from outside sources as well, including the diverse academic communities of Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti. Our worship services are enhanced by the wide range of musical resources provided by our music director, our adult and youth choirs, bell choir, volunteer soloists and instrumentalists.

We draw on our surrounding community for speakers and guest musicians and we take part in a multi-church Habitat for Humanity project, a community CROP Walk, and an interfaith Thanksgiving celebration to name just a few.

With our excellent facilities, our skilled and talented people and our rich surrounding community environment, First UU is blessed with resources that support our many outreach, religious education, social and spiritual activities.

June 12, 2006

Thematic Description
COMMUNITY
First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor
Findings from Appreciative Inquiry - Sankofa Data

The Importance of **Community** at First UU

The First UU congregants arrive at our church feeling "welcomed, accepted and fitted into the community". "I can come to church alone and still feel I belong." This is a place where life-long friendships are formed, especially from… "small group participation".
This is place where we find a community of "people, their talent and vitality, enthusiasm and authenticity, willingness to share and work for the good of the whole, willingness to do whatever it takes."

There are many opportunities to feel involved and connected by working on a project for others, and one of the reasons for the strong feeling of community is the range of options for such work offered at First UU.

After the Sunday service we enjoy visiting or finding "meaningful conversations" with friends at the coffee hour in our handsome, spacious social hall. There we can stop by the Social Action table to sign up for work at the community or memorial gardens, sign up to work on this year's Habitat for Humanity house, CROP Walk or other seasonal outreach activities. There too we can sign on for duty at the interfaith homeless family shelter, our Indian or Transylvanian partner church support groups, or we can sign a petition for an Interfaith Council for a Peace and Justice cause. The Religious Education table offers classes with an "inquisitive approach to religious issues, honest inquiry"'; RE nights; camps and retreats; seasonal rituals; support for the young people's service project; and sign on for teaching RE. The Involvement table lets us sign up to help with Sunday services, attend round Robin dinners, join the choir, get information about Wisdom Seeker groups, the Caring Committee, 20-30s gatherings, nurse services, blood banks etc. We can buy a book at the QUUest bookstore for a book discussion group.

Visitors and others interested in learning more about Unitarian Universalism can meet in a smaller room for coffee and conversation with a member of the congregation.

And beyond Sundays, the church building is humming with small group meetings for newsletter production, classes, committees, book groups, craft groups and also gatherings of groups from the community that rent space in our building. We "do not check our brains at the door" at this place where we can "address things we can't address elsewhere." Our involvement with other like-minded people is exciting. "Everyone in this congregation is involved."…in this " community of common choices (and) similar objectives."
All of these opportunities to meet and work with others in the congregation reinforce the *strong sense of community* which is precious to us.

June 12, 2006

Thematic Description
Culture
First UU Congregation of Ann Arbor
Findings from Appreciative Inquiry - Sankofa Data

Our congregation's story begins quite some time ago, and contains recurring themes of tradition and innovation. We have been an influential part of the larger community in Ann Arbor since our founding over a hundred years ago, and in many ways our congregation's culture today represents many of the values and attributes that characterize Ann Arbor as a whole.

We tend to be middle-class and well-educated, and of European heritage. We find these shared characteristics positive in the potential and power that they represent, but we also find our homogeneity problematic. We are egalitarian, and value the diversity of ideas and experiences that we find in one another, and hope to increase the representation of diverse backgrounds and experiences in our congregational membership.

Our congregational style tends to be relaxed and casual, with strong elements of intellectualism, rationality, and curiosity. We come together to be inspired, challenged, and stimulated by congregational leadership and by one another. We especially value the sense of community we find within the congregation; building connections through one-on-one interactions, small and large group membership, mutual service, and shared worship.

Sunday services are a strongly valued part of our congregational life where sermons, music, meditation, and rituals large and small help bring us together in spiritual and intellectual growth. Our Religious Education program is central in the life of the congregation, encompassing Sunday classes for children and youth and lifespan education including adult RE classes, lectures, and regular family RE nights. Our commitment to the maintenance and growth of our RE program is made tangible in the expansive RE wing recently added to our building.

We plant ourselves strongly in the liberal religious tradition. The seven UU principles are central to our religious education and ongoing spiritual growth. Members of our congregation worship and engage their spirituality in many varied ways, from humanist to pagan traditions. We find stimulation and support in women's and men's groups, and formal and informal spiritual and religious experiences within and without our congregation.

Members of our congregation are vigorously involved in our congregational community and the larger community and world outside. Many are involved in activities and service within the congregation of spiritual, social, and administrative natures. At least as many are involved in outreach to the larger community, where First UU is a community leader in social action and social justice activities, such as Alpha House, Habitat for Humanity, peace work, and many other causes. We value the feeling that our congregation does not exist only within the bounds of our physical property.

Our physical resources are central to congregational life, but thoughts on our building and property are conflicted. Most members value the space and resources in our present building, and we are proud of our efforts to construct and maintain our facilities in an environmentally sustainable fashion. We value the land resources that we now possess: their beauty and natural resources; the opportunity they offer for worship, spiritual growth and exploration; the commitment they represent to preservation of green and wild space. Still, many people miss the

centrality and accessibility of our previous location in downtown Ann Arbor, and some have concerns about our ability to sustain the financial commitments we have made in our land purchase and building construction.

Congregational leadership has been strong and continuous – our senior minister of 25 years has recently retired. At present, the congregation is involved in a process of self-exploration and discovery, to help us determine where we are, and where we want to go in the future. Congregational concerns include our "large church" status (and conflicting feelings between and sometimes within individual members over our continued growth versus sustaining a sense of community); our financial commitments; the diversity of our congregation; and our ability and commitment to welcome members of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, religious histories and beliefs, socioeconomic statuses, gender identities and orientations, and disability statuses.

June 15, 2006