

**First Unitarian Church of Portland  
Congregational Forum  
February 5, 2017**

Board members present: Ameena Amdahl-Mason, Alan Comnes, Kathy Ludlow, Andy Parker, Maryann Roulrier, Randy Russell, Darin Stewart, John Thompson, Leila Wrathall, and Evie Zaic.

Executive Team: Rev. Bill Sinkford, Rev. Tom Disrud, Kathryn Estey.

Rev. Bill Sinkford gave opening words. Congregants read aloud the congregational covenant together.

Alan Comnes made introductory comments. He said that the congregation has had to face the challenges of having lots of changes: Kate Lore's quick and unexpected departure, reader Boards in the sanctuary, and that the Board has been moving forward with its goals, including mission-based approaches to setting priorities. The Board has received lots of letters both before and after the November forum regarding these issues.

This forum will cover three topics:

1. Church's Policy and Decision-making Process
2. Changes to Church Organization and Staffing
3. First Unitarian Church Commitment to Social Justice Programs

There will be about a half-hour for each of these topic areas.

The Board and Executive Team were introduced. Shirlee Geiger and Jean Omelchuck, congregants, will help by reading the Questions, they will separate Questions into topic order. Fr. Jim Galluzzo will be facilitating the discussion. Fr. Jim made introductory remarks explaining that he is using a contemplative listening model, which seeks dialogue rather than debate. It emphasizes listening, being open and respectful, listening with compassion. It doesn't allow for winning and losing. The model is based on Karen Armstrong's model of the becoming more compassionate charter. UUs use this model the most. The format asks us to listen first; we won't resolve all the issues today. This forum is a good model of having a good vision, good principles, and continuing to build good communications. We have an advantage in that we already have a good covenant. The model emphasizes radical hospitality, social justice, and openness.

Fr. Jim explained that this model was used in Northern Ireland, where it took 14 years for them to work through their issues, In South Africa it took 11 years for the peace process. He hopes the process goes much faster here.

Fr. Jim explained that by asking people to write their Questions on 3 x 5 cards, everyone has the opportunity to pose Questions. If Questions were submitted online, we already have them.

### **Topic 1: Church's Policy and Decision-making Process**

Randy Russell read an introductory statement. He said we look forward to holding gatherings where we will review work on revisions to the policies. He explained that the Board writes the policies, and that the Executive Team makes reasonable interpretations of them, and is responsible for day-to-day implementation.

Question: What is Bill's vision for the Church, including the specific ways programs, social justice, and staffing will fit into the church's mission? Please include the 'feel' of what you hope this church will embody. (Before answering, in response to another question, Randy read the Church's mission.)

Bill responded that his vision is to make sure First Unitarian Church (First Church) can continue its mission, standing on 150 years of history, and ensuring that the Church maintains its quality of ministry.

Question: How are you planning to involve congregational input into decision-making (big decisions that will impact the congregation) before they are finalized?

Ameena Amdahl-Mason said that the Board plans to have more forums, café conversations on governing policies, and other topics. Randy added that the Board has heard that congregants want more input. In addition to the conversations mentioned by Ameena, Randy has been writing a monthly moderator's letter. It is apparent that there needs to be clarification of board and ET roles and responsibilities.

Question: Many of us here today are experiencing a break in trust with the leadership of this church. What is your plan to facilitate healing and rebuild that trust so we can truly feel that this church is our sanctuary?

Randy said some ways that the Board is trying to rebuild trust are through the conversations just listed. A congregant indicated that s/he would like to have Bill respond also. Bill said he was mindful that for many congregants trust has been strained and can only be rebuilt through experience with each other. He hopes to do more of this in the future. On the other hand he indicated he is charged with making this large Church work. He and the Executive Team have to make decisions. Once a month he invites in a random group of congregants for conversation.

Fr. Jim noted that rebuilding trust through making connections can take time, e.g. it took three years in Paris to decide on the shape of the peace table. Randy indicated that holding this forum is a part of rebuilding trust.

Question: What forms of oversight are currently in place and/or will be put in place by the board over the Executive Team?

Randy suggested that people read the bylaws and policies where oversight is spelled out. The Board has lots of responsibilities in finance in particular; the component pieces of Board oversight of Church finances are in good shape. He noted that the by-laws are approved by the congregation. Darin Stewart, Treasurer, said that there are several layers of oversight on finances. These include check signing, a three bid requirement for significant purchases, approval by the finance committee and the board for expenditures over \$10,000, and monthly review of church financials by the Finance Committee.

John Thompson stated that the Keyes report was another aspects of oversight, being a review every three years by an outside consultant on some aspect of church functioning. Too, each year the board evaluates how well policies are being implemented. In addition, the Executive Team produces a biannual report on how well the Church is meeting its goals.

Question: Policy based governance does not seem to allow for enough communication and influence of the congregation on important decisions. What are the steps necessary to change this form of governance?

Darin said that policy-based governance doesn't mandate collaboration but doesn't preclude it. John explained that there is a difference between policy and policy-based governance. When changing the structure they (the board and congregation) looked at both policy and policy base governance. Delegating power to an executive is common to both systems. This is done in a lot of UU congregations. Some of what they looked at in deciding to go with policy-based governance is "how does decision-making flow into policy?" And "how does covenant based relationship come in?" The latter needs to be addressed.

Question: There has been a breakdown of congregational and perhaps board input to critical decisions that affect all of us. What changes will be made to remedy this?

Ameena explained that in the past there hasn't always been input when opportunity allows. We will try to get more input on topics through meetings going forward.

Bill noted that part of the challenge is trying to decide what people will want to provide input on and what they won't. He indicated over the last five years he has probably miscalculated on some things. He added that a vibrant Church needs to move forward, and that getting input has to be done in a timely manner. Randy explained that it is same for the Board, that the Church is a complicated system.

One congregant said from the floor said that we would like to hear an acknowledgment that "I screwed this up" sometimes.

Alan said that he doesn't want the congregation to think that the Board and Executive Team are always in congruence. This is not true, sometimes we're working through conflict, although in covenant. Fr. Jim said the last UU Church he had worked with had 80 people. The main complaint was that there was not enough communications. They had listening circles that only three or four people showed up at. Last meeting had 70 people.

Question: How do you justify the way key decisions are being made here and our 5th principle of Democratic Process?

John explained that the Governance Committee has proposed some changes but there wasn't agreement on these. They need more discussion, which will occur at the upcoming retreat. Bill stated that the assumption in a lot of UU Churches is that we would operate like New England town-hall democracies. Moving forward with that model is difficult in a system the size of our Church. With the thousand + adults who are members, and when the basic direction is clear, with enough trust, we can move forward without requiring "town hall" decision-making.

A congregant stated that he came from a Church of 600 in Brooklyn that regularly made decisions in quarterly meetings. It worked well, the meetings took about a half-hour after Church.

Question: Many congregants have asked that the annual meeting be restored. Can we do that this spring, augmented by our mail-in ballots or alternatively can we have a question about this on this year's ballot - put to a vote?

Randy said that he joined the Church in 1985 when there were about 300 members. In the last few annual meetings at First Church it was hard to get a quorum. Mark had all three Choirs sing on those Sundays so we could make a quorum. Annual meetings can be disenfranchising for those who can't come. Therefore they ended up with the vote by mail system, like the State of Oregon has. Meetings like this Forum have replaced annual meetings. The congregant who asked the question clarified that she was asking if there could be an annual meeting and still have a paper ballot for things they choose to vote on at the annual meeting. Randy said he would take this under advisement and when asked whether it was just him who would make a decision, he clarified that he would discuss this with the Board, and asked for a written proposal to be submitted. Randy asked for those present to raise their hands if they think there should be an annual meeting. About half the group appeared to raise their hands. A congregant asked if they could put whether to restore the annual meeting on the ballot this spring.

Question: Two questions about clarifying the underlying tensions, and someone noted that they only hear gossip and don't know what people are talking about. (Response to these question's happened after the break.)

## Topic 2: Keyes Report

Ameena explained that every three years there is a review by an outside consultant. She was moderator when the Keyes report was written. She pointed out that a written report is not always the product, and the previous consultant did not provide a written report. The Board asked Keyes to look at staffing. The Board chose to publicize a summary because the report mentions some people by name. The Board took the report under consideration but did not adopt it. Different Board members had different views of the report. She noted that the report was based on Keyes' view of the Church based on his experience working with large UU congregations.

Bill said that he suggested looking at staffing because of the staff transitions that are occurring. Because of the age of the staff transitions are only beginning. Bill said he thought looking at staffing would be beneficial to plan for the retirements that are coming. Leila Wrathall explain that she has over 30 years human resource experience and that managers are encouraged to do succession planning which is a part of this report. She also noted that some recommendations in the report would require bylaw changes if implemented, which the congregation would have to vote on.

Question: Keyes Report makes assertions, but doesn't support with facts or documentations - re all staff are paid fairly according to UUA standards. Can the congregation see this figures?

Bill said that the Executive Team salaries have been published. He doesn't have program staff agreement to publicize their salaries. He further explained that since the first year of his arrival he has been saying at every AFD that our staff is underpaid. Unionization resulted in a big increase in the Sexton salary. Program staff at the Church are within the UUA Guidelines, but they are on the lower end of the range. A congregant asked whether delegates to the General Assembly will get Fair Compensation ribbons, she has at other UU churches. Kathryn noted that she has never been asked to report salaries to the UUA. Randy said that he was working with Kathryn Estey and that they will get an answer to this question.

Question: what is a mission-based church? And what do you think is our mission at First Unitarian?

Bill said that David Keyes had recommended reading the book The Simple Church, which studied evangelical churches and has been adapted and used in some UU churches, including Rochester, New York. The heart of the book is on welcoming new members, not about people who come in through choir participation, for instance, but more about visitors who show up on Sunday. They don't usually

return. The mission-based church is designed to provide more avenues for entry, to make attachment easier and work with programs we have in helping to engage visitors.

Question: A congregant indicated they were concerned about the perception of change from a program to a mission-based church, in their mind the programs we have embody the mission of the Church. How is being mission-based better?

Randy explained that the goal isn't to drop successful programs. A congregant said in her view people who come to Church have the responsibility to involve themselves. Ameena noted that as a younger person who is single it is easy for her to get to night meetings. This is not necessarily true for people with young families. There isn't a desire to change things that are working well. She did note it's hard for her to get to programs like the Alliance lunches at noon because she works during the day. One could think about programs being within a circle. The mission-based church is about how they think about programs.

Tom Disrud said he works with groups for new people at the Church. Currently it's like a corn maze. He is working on the Congregational Life Initiative. They're looking at how we make clear paths and looking at and creating more robust introduction to UU classes. They want to create a more robust way to enter and be grounded in the Church and then look at how to get involved in the Church. There are a lot of folks who come for a year or two and then leave the Church. Fr. Jim said there is been a 17 to 30% increase in Church attendance nationally since the election. One suggestion he made is to ask new people what they need to keep them coming.

Question: What are the goals, plan and principles of the congregational life initiative?

Tom said the goal is to provide a better basis for people coming into the Church; giving people better grounding in the Church and ways of connecting. Darin added that he agrees that people should take responsibility, but we don't want to put barriers up for people either. We have a lot of barriers. For many people, getting involved in action oriented groups or daytime classes isn't necessarily realistic. People with children want to make friends and may only be able to come on Sundays for an hour or so. He opined that we are a denomination of introverts. Sending people into Fuller Hall and saying "go have coffee" may not be the most effective way to engage people.

Tom said they are looking at some different things such as asking a lay minister to respond to a request by Learning Community parents to help them facilitate connections and building communications between people in retirement homes to enable them to maintain connections when they can't come to Church any longer. Bill expressed the view that we have a dynamic ministry. They are starting to ask different questions, for example how can we do a better job of connecting programs to the mission of the Church. Examples are the women's choir sending a group to the

Women's March, raising the question of what is the relationship between the music and social justice programs.

### **Five-minute break.**

After the break, Ameena said she talked to some people who didn't understand what the issues were that were being raised. She said that there seem to be an "insider/outsider" situation. She succinctly summarized the issues that gave rise to this forum as being: concern about Kate Lore's unexpected departure, the screens in the sanctuary and other decisions without congregant input, unionization of staff, music fees, and future support of social justice programs.

### **Topic 3: Social Justice program staffing**

Bill asked Katherine Jesch, Sandy Hart, and Jim Morris the leadership of the Social Justice Council to discuss how they are proceeding. Sandy said that they didn't have a lot of processes in place when Kate left. Kate handled the processes. Social Justice has been working on putting processes in place. They've been in the streets, they ordered 400 armbands for the Women's March and all are gone now. T J FitzGerald has been a wonderful asset for them. Bill said that there is a broad commitment to Social Justice; it is rock solid. Fr? Jim is working with them next week at the Social Justice Council meeting on the process to move forward. They're looking at staffing, including whether staffing should be ministerial. He hopes that they can post a job announcement in the spring.

Question: "Truth & Reconciliation" Cannot be one without the other. What is the truth about Kate Lore's departure? Was it her free will? Financial concerns? Friction with the ET? The goal of limiting SJ (as mentioned in the Keyes report)?

Bill stated that the Keyes report was never adopted. Kate Lore left of her own volition. She was a called minister; he couldn't have asked her to leave if he had wanted to and he did not want her to leave. She was called by the congregation. A congregant asked about Kate's release of call and why wasn't there a vote by the congregation. Bill explained that Kate had requested to have a service of release of call and he had obliged. Nothing binds ministers, so there is no requirement for congregations to release them. A congregant asked why Social Justice wasn't being treated like the music director where the congregation agreed to the plan. The plan for the music program was never sent to the congregation--that was between Mark Slegers and Bill. Bill said that the Social Justice Council is involved in the planning. He hopes to have a faster process for staffing than the process for the music director and with the same degree of care.

Question: Can we vote on emerita status for Kate Lore this year?

Randy and Bill both stated that status normally is only reserved for ministers who retire in place.

Question: Please clarify that not everyone present today sees a breach of trust. They are here to get a clearer understanding of others' concerns. They trust that ministers and Board and look forward to the listening sessions. They prefer to focus energy on what needs to be done looking forward. We're at the Forum to support the ministers and Board.

In closing, Alan said there are some questions we didn't get to because of time and some because they are outside of the three topics. We will post those questions and minutes of the forum [this document]. Randy said there would be a follow-up to this gathering, listening circles to continue having conversations and to act on goals. Kathy asked if we captured issues that people are unhappy about and are we ready to move forward with discussing what's next. Although a raise of hands indicated broad support, one congregant said she felt there was still in need to talk about feelings of hurt. Fr. Jim expressed the view that if you don't share feelings and hurt, it will sabotage moving forward. A congregant stated she thought Bill and the Board needed to physically witness sessions where congregants were grieving and expressing their hurt. A congregant said that she wanted to thank the Board members as volunteers and the Executive Team for being there.