

Grassroots task group Intro, Meeting Summary and Recommendations

INTRO

A communications task group of nine UUCGT congregants with differing perspectives has completed a meeting summary and recommendations on how to re-establish effective communication within our congregation.

The grassroots group's full report and recommendations are included in this issue of the Flash. It also will be an agenda item at the interim board's first meeting of the year on Tuesday, January 19, at UU. That meeting starts at 5:30 p.m.

The summary does not address specifics of events and issues that led to what the summary called "the current state of profound discontent."

"However, we do believe that if we can restore effective communications, it will provide the tools needed to begin negotiations required to reunite our heartbroken congregation and deal with all the unresolved issues," the summary said.

The independent initiative was proposed in late fall by UU member Linda Fletcher, who asked Donna Stein-Harris to help facilitate the meeting. Fletcher, a retired lieutenant colonel in the Army Nurse Corps, is a member of the pastoral care committee. Stein-Harris has a long background in health and safety communications and community organizing. She is a member of the congregation's stewardship committee.

The task group met for about two hours in early December. Attendees were UU members Richard Miller, Mary Van Valin, Nancy Cotcamp, Jane Watts, Nick Erber, Susan Sherman (staff), Chris Walter, Paula Ward and Mary Grover.

Discussion was divided into four parts:

- What motivated attendees to participate?
- A review of elements of good communication.
- Discussion of how to incorporate these elements into our communications.
- The Unitarian-Universalist Congregation of Grand Traverse's Covenant.

To read the full report online, please go to UUCGT.org, open the **About Us** tab and click on the link to the meeting summary and recommendations report. Copies are also available at the UUCGT office at 6726 Center Road, Traverse City, Michigan. The telephone number is 231-947-3117.

The five-page meeting summary and recommendations follow.

MEETING SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

UUCGT Communications Task Group

December 9, 2015

Attendees: Richard Miller, Mary Van Valin, Nancy Cotcamp, Jane Watts, Nick Erber, Susan Sherman, Chris Walter, Paula Ward, Mary Grover

Facilitators: Linda Fletcher, Donna Stein-Harris

We have all been deeply saddened by the events in recent months that have led to an erosion of the peaceful loving feeling that has been characteristic of our congregation. Unfortunately, our original issue and the others that have spun from it have not yet been addressed in a meaningful way.

The vast preponderance of our communications have been characterized by emotionally charged exchanges that have not led to productive discussions. In an attempt to regain our goal of restoring our previous peaceful milieu, we, as a group of concerned congregants, formed to determine how we might re-establish effective communications. We believe a return to effective communications will enable us to resolve our issues and began to heal and reunite.

Toward that end, nine congregants with different perspectives convened to begin sorting out how to reintroduce effective communications to our congregants. As a group, we began by exploring what keeps us coming back to this church in spite of the recent turmoil.....what the church means to us on an individual basis.

It should be noted that everyone in the group is very anxious for divisive issues to be resolved and want to move forward with mediation as soon as possible. However, most agreed that communication issues must be a fundamental part of this process and that our purpose was to regain the ability to effectively communicate. The resolution of specific issues, which is an ultimate goal and imperative for the restoration of our group cohesiveness, is a separate issue that can be addressed once effective communications are re-established.

In our meeting, we did not address the specifics of the events and issues that have led to our current state of profound discontent. However, we do believe that if we can restore effective communications, it will provide the tools needed to begin the negotiations required to reunite our heartbroken congregation by dealing with all the unresolved issues. Those issues all need to be addressed in detail and mediation has been identified as the probable tool to achieve this.

The discussion was divided into four parts. Each of these is addressed below:

1. WHAT MOTIVATED ATTENDEES TO PARTICIPATE

All participants of the committee expressed concern that the events of the last several months have eroded the solidarity of the congregation and they hold the potential to significantly and permanently affect the fabric of this group. They are acutely aware of a we/they environment and are united in their desire to see that turned around. They feel that all congregants have been hurt by our lack of clear and respectful communications, which have led to emotional unrest and pain in all of our congregants.

Each of the participants was asked to speak about their personal reasons for belonging to the UU. Without exception, it should be noted that all the committee members feel a close connection to UU for many different reasons including, but not limited to:

- It's a safe place that serves as a moral compass
- Good hearted, smart people
- The congregation supports diverse thinking
- The music
- Provides a spiritual break in our busy lives
- It's a place where we find hope for the world
- A place for personal growth
- It's a supportive social network

It was illuminating to hear the many touching and profound reasons that anchor these committee members to the UU. In summary, we love our church and are prepared to work to regain our previous status of loving kindness.

2. A REVIEW OF ELEMENTS OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

We discussed the power of our words and reviewed the teachings of Ruiz.... "Be impeccable in your speech." Then, we brainstormed what we believe to be the essential elements of good communication. The items we identified are listed below:

- Clear, concise, complete
- Open and honest – real without fear of being dismissed
- Listening with attention and intention
- Direct/Face-to-Face (email or texts not optimal)
- Wait – think before you speak and say what you mean
- Emphasis should be on addressing and correcting issues, not people
- Speak directly to those involved, not to others on the periphery
- Respectful...in word, tone and manner
- Not only allow, but respect and encourage dissenting opinions

3. DISCUSSION REGARDING HOW TO INCORPORATE THESE ELEMENTS INTO OUR COMMUNICATIONS

A review of our existing Covenant revealed that this promise addresses the elements of good communication that we identified in our discussion. In fact, much of the Covenant directly emphasizes the importance of OUR COVENANT:

Mindful of our vibrant Congregational history and steadfastly committed to a strong future, we strive to promote good in the world and aid each other in ethical and spiritual development.

To this end, I willfully Covenant to:

Welcome with open minds and hearts all who gather here;

Inspire and respect others, from youngest to oldest, on our various spiritual paths;

Assume good intentions, communicate directly, share ideas freely, listen willingly, disagree respectfully, and forgive easily;

Support the ministry of our Congregation through gifts of time, talent and money.

Encourage all voices to speak and be heard, as we participate in a collaborative and democratic process.

After some discussion, it was determined that our recent communications have not been in keeping with the Covenant and a return to this basic promise could re-establish our prior environment of productive and loving interactions. No further tool development is required.

The question then becameHow can we help refocus the congregation on the Covenant so they can return to thoughtful, respectful and meaningful dialogue in preparation for the next proposed step which is mediation to discuss our differences?

4. PLANS TO REFOCUS ON OUR COVENANT

The single most important action to restore our communications integrity rests with each and every individual. Without exception, everyone in the congregation has to take individual responsibility to model the Covenant. That means our speech must conform to the intention of the Covenant and, further, we are obliged to address others when their communications are out of Covenant. Failure to generate or receive communications that are out of Covenant promotes the proliferation and acceptance of communications of a similarly negative nature and leads to the promotion of the degradation of our basically loving environment.

We determined that stopping negative communications may be an uncomfortable undertaking and discussed some ways this might be addressed. They are outlined below:

If members are seemingly out of Covenant, appropriate responses might be:

- "I'm finding this difficult to hear"
- "Dial it down, please"
- "I can hear you better if you rephrase that in a more positive way"

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES TO EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF GOOD COMMUNICATIONS

The importance of listening respectfully to all perspectives was discussed at length. Reviewing the work of others who have dealt with this type of issue might provide valuable lessons. We specifically talked about Nelson Mandela's model of truth and reconciliation. His basic idea is that most actions can be understood and resolved if we take the time to listen to the reasons behind the actions or positions of those involved. Communicating respectfully is at the heart of this proven healing technique and it is well demonstrated in the movie "In My Country." It was suggested that this film might be shown at the Wednesday Night Supper....and possibly at other times....and followed by discussion.

The work of Brene' Brown was also discussed. Her books "the Gifts of Imperfection" and "Rising Strong" speak to the importance of respectful communications. Discussion groups might be formed to explore her work.

Articles in the Beacon could target the importance of personal and individual responsibility for integrity in communications....as well as how to stop negative talk.

The importance of good communications as outlined by our Covenant should be emphasized in all of our committees. Committee chairs could be provided with information and/or training about good communications and they could be tasked with disseminating it to their committee members.

Continued and expanded information from the pulpit could be provided regarding the "care and feeding" of healthy communications

This is a start but additional strategies for activities to reinforce the importance of good communications will emerge.

Review policies and governance practices to ensure emphasis on good communications throughout our infrastructure.

Place increased emphasis on our Covenant by reading it prior to or during every committee meeting or congregational gathering.

OTHER THOUGHTS BRIEFLY DISCUSSED

Note: Our two-hour meeting did not allow us to have an in-depth discussion about the items below, but are noted below for future analysis:

1. Hit the "Pause" button, wipe the slate clean....treat it as an irreconcilable difference and move on
2. Facilitate forgiveness and understanding through the mediation process – as soon as possible
3. Do a root cause analysis to avoid this happening again.

Respectfully submitted for your consideration by the UUCGT Ad hoc Task Group on Communication

Editor's note: "In My Country" is a 2006 movie set against the backdrop of the South African Truth and Reconciliation hearings. It charts the depths of pain and suffering and the redeeming power of forgiveness and love.