

“Better Together”
October 24th, 2021
Rev. Laurel Gray
& the UUCSW Board of Trustees

Reflection 1: Kim

Board Retreat
A different approach

Since this was the first time the board had gathered in person for over a year, we first spent time “re-experiencing” the building, which was a grounding and emotional experience. Then we gathered in the chapel and used a “sand play” approach well known to Laurel to center us around two prompts, using a sharing and response approach similar to the pods.

We all enjoyed this new approach toward processing and goal setting while thinking about the future of the church.

This engaging activity involved putting objects into the sandbox, and then sharing how they related to two prompts- thinking first about what we needed to let go of in order to imagine a different future. In the second prompt we considered what the church means to us, why we are here, and why do we do what we do. This was a very powerful way to get down to the foundation of the retreat and prepare us for the second part after lunch.

After a lunch break, we got on zoom with Erica Baron, whom many of you know as one of our UUA facilitators. We followed a recommendation from a video by UUA consultant Dan Hotchkiss on effective governance, who suggests to first ask the big questions, and then formulate goals with the congregation based on these. Erica Baron helped us move through the process of asking questions and formulating priorities based on the church mission.

To do this we looked at the four parts of the mission statement that we recite every week:

This is our spiritual home where we:

Embrace diversity, celebrate together and practice our UU principles.

- 1) Spiritual home
- 2) Embrace Diversity
- 3) Celebrate
- 4) Practice our UU principles

We each were asked to brainstorm our own questions around each of these 4 areas. Next we were asked for ideas for concrete actions we could take in the near future.

Then we reviewed all the questions together. We did the same with proposed actions we could take. At the end we all agreed on what were the highest priorities, based on the main themes that most resonated with all of us.

Erica helped distill them into main questions and actionable priorities for the church year.

The final questions generated by consensus were:

“How do we create a sense of belonging within boundaries?”

“How can people be involved in activities and leadership in ways that feel life-giving and not based on obligation?”

The potential actions we discussed as areas of focus for the coming church year are:

Policy review and creation with open communication with the congregation

Re-envisioning lifespan faith formation eg with focus on RE for all ages

Re-imagining and reconfiguring our physical space and organizational structures

The board will be following up on these priorities to decide:

“What is the next elegant step for each of these actions?”

The rest of the reflections will talk more about what came out of this process.

Reflection 2: Laurel

In the process of coming up with these big guiding questions, these two words kept coming up: boundaries and belonging. And when it came time to narrow down our focus to two questions, someone chimed in “aren’t boundaries and belonging kind of the same thing?” I suspect most of the therapists in our congregation would agree, maybe not that they’re exactly the same thing, but that true belonging cannot exist without boundaries.

And yet, in a society so profoundly steeped in so-called “individual freedom,” boundaries often get reframed as punishment, in a storm of “how dare you tell me that I can’t do something just because it harms you.” In this dynamic, the “I” matters far more than the “we,” even to the point of violence. It’s a paradigm that knows nothing of connection or accountability.

As I reflected two weeks ago, Unitarian Universalism is a tradition committed to living in covenant - that sacred, enduring promise to care for each other mutually. Our commitment is to the “we,” to the magic of caring and being cared for, to the commitment to tell the truth with love, especially when it’s hard.

One of my favorite definitions of boundaries is that it’s the distance at which we can love ourselves and each other at the same time. It’s the balance point between everything being on one person’s terms or on another person’s terms. That balance point is the place of freedom and belonging, because no one person reigns supreme. No one person’s opinion or personality governs the community, and no one is excluded, so there is space for connection, accountability, and safety. That’s when belonging - that powerful sense of welcome and care and wholeness - becomes possible.

It can also be really uncomfortable finding our way to that balance point. It requires the courage and vulnerability to say “that’s not okay with me” and “I don’t know” and “this hurt me” and “I’m sorry.” It’s easier to keep armoring up, to keep fighting - it takes a lot of courage to listen when someone tells us the truth, it takes a lot of courage, a lot of faith, to imagine that accountability might be possible and speak up when harm has occurred.

This balance point - that magical space where we can love ourselves and each other at the same time, it takes work - like any relationship - it takes work. And, is there anything more core to our humanity than the need to belong?

As a congregation, may this question guide us in how we show up to this community together. Not only as church staff or leaders, but as a whole, collective “we.”

How do we create boundaries that cultivate a sense of belonging?

Reflection 3: David

The second big question is: “How can people be involved in activities and leadership in ways that feel life-giving and not based on obligation?”

I understand this question from both ends because of my experience with both the board of trustees and the religious education committee. Overall they have been personally rewarding and fulfilling and have enriched my connection with lots of people in the community. I feel a sense of accomplishment as it encouraged me to try new and different things, and I feel it has made me a better person. Sure, it was not always smiles and laughs - although we have had plenty of those - but overall I think it fits the expression “feeling life-giving.”

But I also know that none of that would have happened without that feeling of obligation. I’ve said before that the reason I originally joined the RE committee was because I didn’t think I would be a good teacher - that I would rather help the RE program behind the scenes instead of being a teacher.

When I started in this congregation the RE program had a lot more youth than it does now - around 80-90. We had 5 RE classes per week and rotated teaching teams 2-3 types per year. If you add that up then you will see we also had a lot of people volunteering to teach. For some, part of their volunteering was the policy that parents help run the program.

Our shrinking RE program was a trend seen in many UU churches and there were a variety of factors for this that were more based on cultural trends than any individual church. But to me the interesting question is how we adapted to this.

I recall the meeting when we first realized that we could not run the program with just the RE parents. We actually built spreadsheets to track the number of volunteer slots we needed along with the number of parents available. We had two options -

- 1) Try to push for enough volunteers to run the program as it was.
- 2) Restructure RE programming to require fewer volunteers.

We went with the second option because the committee and DRE decided that we would rather have a restructured program with fewer enthusiastic teachers than the same program with a bunch of people who were not committed to teaching.

A similar trend is happening more broadly in our congregation. Again, this is a trend that affects many churches and volunteer organizations. Single income

households are much rarer and studies show that everyone is working many more hours than before. And the last 18 months have people reassessing their priorities in response to the pandemic.

So the question is how we respond to this. Do we try to keep the same structures as before or do we determine another path? How we answer this is more about our community and values than it is about recruitment.

One of our core principles when I was RE co-chair was that we share the load enough so no one gets burned out - this included the DRE. I had seen a trend where people join a committee, become chair of that committee, move to the board, and then stop coming to church after their board term is done.

I recall looking at the website of a nearby church a few years ago and was surprised to see that they had more than 10 multi-person committees even though they were smaller than us. However, when I looked at the list I realized that a lot of the names were the same and some people were on every committee.

We are not to that extreme but we definitely have a few people with many hats. That alone is not a problem as we are all complex people with many interests. But it can be a problem if too much is being asked of those people or if it leads to burnout. It also can be a problem if there is no one to do something.

To me, part of this question is how we can structure activities and leadership so people can do what is fulfilling to them while ensuring that everything that needs to be done is done. This may involve changing how we structure our committees or responsibilities for church staff. Answering this question will involve our whole community.

But another part of this is growing a community where everyone has an answer to the question:

“How can I be involved in activities and leadership in ways that feel life-giving and not based on obligation?”