

UCH COTTAGE MEETINGS REPORT

The Congregational Life Team

October 21, 2018

Between August and October, the Congregational Life Team, at the request of the Board, conducted a series of twelve cottage meetings with 116 people who are active in the UCH community. The purpose of the cottage meetings was to enter in to deep conversations with the congregation about who we are, and what are our goals and aspirations for the church, given the important decisions that the congregation will need to make over the upcoming months. In a sense, these conversations provide context for our decision-making process, and it is our hope that they provide a starting point for the next set of conversations about UCH's finances and how to move forward.

All cottage meetings centered around the responses to only two questions. They were: "What would we as a congregation look like without our buildings or staff? " AND "What would be missing from your life if this congregation did not exist?" The quotes that follow are responses to these questions.

Real life is messy and doesn't always adhere to a single narrative. This was the case with the cottage meetings, too. Rather than provide lots of interpretation and create a singular story from the cottage meeting notes, we have instead chosen to provide you with the raw data, in the form of quotes said during the meetings, so that you can discern your own meaning and narrative from these. We have organized the quotes into a limited number of what we see as overarching themes (in bold) from the meetings. In the coming months, we will need to work toward a shared meaning for the decisions that we make, and our hope is that these quotes will remind us of our rich and varied vision for our church and help us to be a community in which folks with a variety of goals can feel welcome.

We ask that you read, reflect and engage in conversation with each other and with the members of the Congregational Life Team. We will be available during coffee hour or email us at UCH.CLT@gmail.com.

WHO ARE WE?

As a community - we look inward so that we can learn from one another; so that we can build spirituality, inner strength, and courage to live better lives; so that we can teach our children

"An amazing collection of people; our connections feed continuous learning."

"A place to continue my quest to understand, to be challenged, to get out of my comfort zone, a place to follow my intellectual pursuits."

"To experiment with ideas and test them out; see how will it make me a better person."

"To find out that I'm more than just my own abilities; I can contribute more when I'm with others."

"A unifying effort of diverse people to reach a common goal or mission."

"An opportunity to be my true self." "I can be here fully and authentically."

"Like-minded, accepting, welcoming, liberal, making people feel comfortable."

"This is my family of choice, a family where you are accepted for who you are."

"An opportunity to grow spiritually."

"Church exists for spirituality, to nurture something in self."

"Spirituality is presence, people connecting, interacting; the connection rejuvenates her to think about the challenge of what to be doing in her life."

"Music is the tie that binds."

"Every week is a reset to do better; in the worship service, I meditate, think, restart."

"An opportunity to grow as a musician; to have joy in music-making."

"Something to give back to"

"Enables the balancing of giving and receiving; of helping people and being helped."

"An opportunity to grow; personal growth is only limited by your time."

"This is a lifesaving congregation."

"Gives me courage to step out and speak up." "To own who I am and speak about it."

"Courage to find my authentic self."

"Source of strength and encouragement that empowers people."

"Talking to ourselves is one thing; courage to go out is another."

"My focus in life changed."

"I am more accepting than I would have been without this church; so others trust me and can confide their true selves."

"I have changed the way I am because of UCH."

"UCH allowed me to survive; community breakfasts and community hours were an active opportunity to share, to give, a place to go to create community."

"For my children, so they can meet others who have these values, not just me."

"I can explore my spirituality and pass to my child."

"It's comfortable for kids and provides life lessons for them."

"Building a healthy community around my kids so that they can grow and maintain commitments."

"I stay because of my kids. UCH is a liberal place that counters the conservatism that surrounds them."

"It is important to provide a safe place for children."

"RE is the core of our church."

As a community - we look outward to the larger community to offer what we have

"We provide services to the community - events, meetings; inviting in the community to experience our voice."

"The Harrisburg community would be different without us, loss of a liberal religious voice."

"We need to be available to those in the Harrisburg area; a light for people to know we're here."

"How do people find you? How do they know where you are?"

"This church has been entrusted to us; it's the mission to continue to create this liberal place for people who define this as important to them."

"I would have been looking for you if I had known about you."

"Here is a group of people who will welcome you and there is no requirement you have to meet before you can get in the lifeboat."

"You people, you're different!"

"I would miss the opportunities that we make available to each other."

"I would feel I was missing 'a sense of agency', that I can make a difference by being with this faith, whose values are in alignment with mine. I've had the opportunity to do things I didn't know I could, to make an impact on the lives of those less fortunate."

"I would miss a sense of 'potential agency' where we could strategize to do more."

"I was drawn to this church because it made a statement in moving to the City; it's about loyalty to what we said by our action, not about the building."

"What's in me is mine, but how do I apply who I am to the life around me? How do I live, breathe, demonstrate who I am?"

We can welcome renewal, liberation from the old

"Maybe we need to start over."

"Leaving it behind gives a chance for us to start over."

"'Implode' the old and start over ... bring together and from that, and you will 'explode' into new things ... Embrace debate, discussion, frustration, anger, anxiety, then make a decision. Fully embraced, leave behind doubts and disagreements."

"We're the remnant that needs to continue and be reborn."

"Like the Israelites in the Desmond Tutu reading, we're not the first group who had a problem that needed to be solved; we are a lot of talented people with different strengths and out of that we are something together."

"We can wander in the wilderness for a while, sharing space and holding together until we find a new home."

"A loosely connected tribe moving forward and trying to create a home."

"There's something liberating about it."

"We're the most resilient people I've ever met. We've been through a lot and we're still here."

"We need a necessary shift to personal responsibility to maintain what we have; what am I going to do to maintain this community?"

"This church represents hope; infinite potential is lost if we no longer exist."

"We'll be okay if we remain meaningful to people in search for truth and meaning."

"I see all those faces, but can't see the backdrop. Disconcerting not to see the backdrop, but we are the core and I will go anywhere. Some will not."

"Other UU churches have had periods without a home, and survived well."

"A better option for us might be to get a new, different place; it's a spiritual practice to let go of what no longer serves us."

"The buildings have physically divided us; the lack of buildings will relieve strain and stress; letting go of strain we've had, reflected in 2 buildings."

"We're in ... and will do whatever it takes,"

"Wherever the church goes, we'll go."

"Find a way to reclaim who we are and let go of the physical; a metamorphosis might come."

Our challenges/our mission

"We don't have a strong sense of identity now."

"We're all over and not coming together; we need to find something that connects and we stand behind with everything we have."

"We are still factionalized. Not acrimonious, but not cohesive. Will we come together or fizzle out?"

"Two strong values - Spiritual growth and social justice."

"We have a lot of good intentions but don't always follow through; talk the talk, but not the walk."

"We don't reflect Harrisburg, we're not "of Harrisburg."

"We made an effort 10 years ago - maybe it failed or maybe it didn't - but the church can do more."

"Our action in acquiring Market Street was transformative; there was a real sense of community there; we gave birth to GTS."

"I was so thrilled that we could take a courageous step; we made the financially risky choice, reaching outside of ourselves, engaged with passion and energy. It totally revitalized my sense of being a UU. I was filled with pride."

"We are a people committed to a wide variety of passions; each should have equal validity so that we can pursue all opportunities."

"There are many different organizations doing various social justice activities, but UCH has tentacles in many of them and brings it all together in one place." "A hub."

"We are people with wide variety of passions, but enough in common to pull together."

"Love the big tent, but do we have too many different directions?"

"We are too stretched and people have to beg for help with anything."

"How do you navigate people being drawn to different aspects of the church (the location they went to reflects that difference)? This building or that building goes beyond the physical to who are we and our identity."

"Our buildings reflect our values - 2 polar groups, not the same."

"We need bottom-up communication. This is what you do if you have different tribes."

"If we want to be one community, we need an entirely new space for at least a transitional time so we can reclaim ourselves."

"We'll have to have a leave-taking, but this could lead to creating a new identity that's not polarized."

"Is our mission to be UUs and that directs our actions as individuals, or do our individual actions collectively form our mission?"

"Do we exist for ourselves or do we exist for something else?"