

UUCA BOARD LINKAGE REPORT

Facilitated Discussions with parents, teachers, staff, children and youth related to RE

July, 2016



OVERVIEW:

Under policy governance, the UUCA Board of Trustees participates in a linkage activity with the congregation each year and our most recent outreach was to the Religious Education community – parents, children, youth, teachers, and staff. This was not an attempt to review the RE program and its practices but an undertaking to better understand how RE participants respond to the Powerful Question: “How can RE help our spirits grow together?” This feedback is intended as a valuable tool in considering whether or not to revise our three Policy Ends related to this aspect of our church mission.

THEMES:

- RE should be built around an intergenerational community.
- Families are looking for a small church feeling in a big church.
- There is a need to create wider church awareness of what goes on in RE.
- Parents want their children to authentically love coming to church.
- RE is a part of lifespan education that encompasses the whole church. We are all together in learning and life – joining with each other to grow and enjoy and share our lives.

INSIGHTS:

- Some have a sense of an upstairs/downstairs divide – we need to transform into an integrated church family.

- RE should be multi-generational.
- We want to build community – take care of each other.
- RE should be flexible, teach values, and embrace change.
- We need to have a church-wide conversation – it should not be staff driven.
- We should move away from a curriculum-based approach to an experiential approach.
- **KEY WORDS – EMERGENCE, INTEGRATED, EXPERIENTIAL, SPIRITUAL, COMMUNITY.**

STRENGTHS/AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- RE is in transition. We are moving away from silos to circles which presents an opportunity for impactful transformation.
- Building blocks for a close-knit, caring RE community integrated into the larger church include: better communication, broader church-wide participation, stronger interpersonal networks created through more options for social interaction, and deeper spiritual bonds developed through service and social justice projects and experiential learning.

TAKEAWAYS AS THEY RELATE TO OUR ENDS:

- People feel they belong and are cared for.
 - RE is critical to integrating families into the whole church.
 - With commitment, RE can emerge as a multi-generational, experiential spiritual growth opportunity that builds bridges throughout the church and is embraced by all as the foundation of a caring community.
- People experience a spiritually vital faith community.
 - RE is where our children learn about UU values, spirituality and principles.
 - Building church community begins here – RE is a valuable component of our spiritual foundation.
- The Church is a force for service and social justice.
 - RE is where we teach our children and youth the value of service, giving, empathy, religious understanding, social justice, appreciation of nature, and spirituality.
 - Service and social justice actions should have no age boundaries and are the core to living our UU values.

PROCESS:

The Board reached out to Bill Fogarty who is the leader of the Connectors Group at UUCA. Together with LeeAnn Williams, our Director of Lifespan and Religious Education, Bill arranged for a group of facilitators to lead discussions with different groups related to RE. During the spring of 2016, we had various sessions. The children gathered to draw pictures about what they enjoyed doing, the youth had a discussion session of their own, and the parents and teachers came together to talk about their vision for RE as it relates to their children’s spirituality. Facilitators asked the group: 1) tell me a story about a time you felt your family’s spirit grow through our church, and 2) if you could make three wishes for how our church could help your family’s spirit grow in the future, what would those wishes be? We summarized the responses according to our church mission of connect, grow, and serve. The parents

also drew pictures sharing how they view RE and how they dream it to be. The wordle above is also a reflection of the key words that came out of the sessions.

As a follow up, the Linkage Committee members, Janice Morris, Wendy Jessup, and Andrea Ryon, met with the facilitators who led the groups to listen to their feedback about what they saw emerge during the linkage exercises.

There were 49 parents and 81 youth/children for a total of 130 participants in addition to facilitators and Board observers.

Thank you to a tremendous group of facilitators: Linda Battaglini, Barbara Buzzell, Jacomina de Regt, Bill Fogarty, Kathleen Fugle, Emily Goodin, Burke Kappler, Chuck MacLane, D Ohlandt, Annie Parker, Warren Wright, John Zeray and to LeeAnn Williams and Ashley Egan for all their engagement and support. This report will be distributed via Connections and the RE email alert and placed on the UUCA website with many thanks to all participants from the Board. LeeAnn Williams also has all of the documentation for use in her management of the RE program.

KEY IDEAS FROM PARENTS:

CONNECT:

Upstairs/Downstairs Divide – Communications - Networking

- Expand the number of people teaching RE to help foster connection between “upstairs” church and “downstairs” church. Let parents spend more time upstairs.
- Increase involvement of church members who mostly stay upstairs into RE. Need more non-parent RE teachers.
- More intergenerational interaction – create mentoring opportunities between older adults and kids.
- NETWORKING - Create more opportunities for parents to talk with each other (have more discussions like these). Circle dinners for parents? Playground person to watch kids so parents can stay and have coffee? Parent covenant groups (by age of children)? Parent retreat? Topic seminars?
- Have more time with ministers – have them come on a family hike.
- Get children more involved in upstairs services – ushering, greeting, etc.
- Make sure sermons at All Welcome services are geared towards kids. Have a better family worship experience when upstairs together.
- Upstairs/downstairs connected in weekly theme – not RE curriculum.
- COMMUNICATIONS - Develop stronger communications – church to parents, parents to each other, RE to upstairs.
- Be aware of special needs children and how they can be integrated.
- Create process to integrate newcomers other than just showing up in class (a welcome group).
- More engagement between older youth and younger children.
- Have a process for honoring life changes/events.
- Centralize where information is kept – make it easy to access and ask questions.
- Connect to the outside – integrate nature into our worship.
- Don’t use the word “linkage.” Change to “making a connection?” “dialogue?”

GROW:

Time together – more spirituality – welcoming bridges – awareness - flexibility

- Create wider church awareness of what goes on in RE.
- Develop parent group for young families (Yahoo list for exchanging ideas, organized get togethers mid-week or on Saturdays).
- Organize family potlucks, picnics, camping, BBQ's, canoe trips, other outings.
- Strengthen training for RE teachers.
- Make introverts comfortable.
- Do more outdoor activities – springboard for greater spirituality.
- Fully staff OWL so teachers can spend some time upstairs.
- Learn more about other religions and the history of our faith.
- Organize programming so there is time for spiritual growth for the parents.
- Be aware of special needs children and how they can be integrated.
- Create process to integrate newcomers other than just showing up in class (a welcome group).
- More engagement between older youth and younger children.
- Have a process for honoring life changes/events.
- Have more small groups within RE but avoid creating cliques.
- Learn how to stand up for UU values.
- Teach mindfulness and yoga.
- Consider only one RE time. Create more predictability in schedule.
- FAMILY FRIENDLY - Have shorter services (one hour), bean bags, snacks, modern curriculum.

SERVE:

Social justice – service projects – values

- Create family-oriented volunteer activities – maybe once a month.
- Do volunteer activities as part of RE.
- Inspire empathy in children in youth through activities/messages.
- Reinforce community and participation among youth.
- Adopt a grand-parent.
- Integrate social justice activities upstairs with RE downstairs.
- Workshop models for RE – teach values, about other religions, social justice, nature, spirituality.
- Replicate CASE program for 7th and 8th graders – very effective.
- Youth want more service opportunities.

KEY IDEAS FROM YOUTH GROUP:

- Want to mentor the younger kids (freshman orientation).
- Address group divides – youth, choir, chalice theatre cliques.
- Like service trips, OWL program.
- Want to connect to other groups in the church.
- Easy to speak your mind – open and accepting – sense of security.
- We want personal connections and reaching out. Enjoy sharing circles.

- The space is warm, inviting.
- Want to learn more about UU'ism/other religions. Clearer themes – modern curriculum – current events.

KEY IDEAS FROM FACILITATORS/STAFF:

- Need to understand the connection between what parents want and the aim of the program.
- RE program needs to be multi-generational. Get more people involved.
- Need to focus on spiritual experience.
- Want RE downstairs to be as important as upstairs. Need RE families to feel integrated into the whole church.
- We have silos – want circles.
- Should create a safe space where parents can talk.
- Want it be experiential – more active – less curriculum based.
- Want more community building.
- Need to break down barriers – especially upstairs/downstairs.
- RE is where we establish values that we want our children to learn.
- We need to shift our language from silos – always looking back – need to create hope for the future.
- We need language of EMERGENCE.
- Transition years were rough – need a church-wide conversation about RE.
- Need a cultural shift – parents own the program right now. But they are invisible to the upstairs.
- Different churches have different strengths – some good at community (taking care of each other) and others good at social justice but they happen to come together as a community – we are more of the latter. A shift would take years of commitment.
- Hard to change curriculum – some people are nostalgic to keep it the same way.
- Things have gotten rigid at UUCA. Afraid to change.
- We need to be willing to fail – take chances. Foster flexibility.