



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF ARLINGTON VIRGINIA

**A Place to Connect, Grow and Serve**

## 2017 UUCA BOARD OF TRUSTEES “WONDERING OUT LOUD” REPORT

### COMMUNICATIONS SESSIONS ON VULNERABILITY AND TRUST

June, 2017

#### OVERVIEW

Each year the UUCA Board of Trustees conducts a targeted outreach to various segments of the congregation for insight. These insights guide the Board’s understanding of the will and vision of our “moral owners” – our church Members, Friends, ancestors and future members. Under policy governance, this is called “linkage” – but in truth it is two-way communication that allows the Board to interpret whether UUCA’s Ends are being met or if they need to be changed or expanded.

Our Ends specify that the Church will be a community where:

- ***People feel they belong and are cared for;***
- ***People of all ages experience a spiritually vital faith community and have opportunities for personal and spiritual growth;***
- ***The church is a force for service, social justice, and environmental justice.***

The question which guided our outreach in the 2016-2017 church year was:

***“What does it mean to be a trusting and vulnerable church community that transforms us into our best selves? How can this help us to grow and serve?”***

First and foremost we want to express our deep appreciation for those who accepted this invitation and participated by sharing their “soul stories.” Their honest emotions and shared experiences support the health and growth of UUCA. Their sharing benefits the whole congregation and Board Members as their representatives. Without your willingness to step forward and take time out of your busy schedules we would not have experienced such a rich and fulfilling dialogue. Through our facilitated small groups we listened to feelings and ideas around how we can build trust - through open and honest conversations, by sharing our vulnerabilities, and exploring how our individual and shared experiences can help UUCA be the community we describe in our Ends.

This year the Board built upon the Circles of Trust model that many of us experienced at the year-long Retreat “Leading From Within” series based on the teachings of Parker Palmer. We gathered in small groups with a cross-section of UUCA Members and Friends to talk about our personal experiences, our experiences at UUCA, and how the church can grow and serve. We decided to call these sessions “Wondering Out Loud” because that defined our goal of walking down a path together in open discernment to find out where our vulnerabilities would lead us. One participant summed it up beautifully:

***“... simply leaving (open) space, without judging people can be valuable. There is no need to fix or give advice – just being present has value.”***

## **PROCESS**

In order to encourage participation and to hear from groups across a wide spectrum of the church – newcomers, long time members, RE parents, young adults, introverts, extroverts, leaders, followers, and some who haven’t even been to church in a while – the Board Chair, Warren Wright, issued personal email invitations to people chosen randomly from our church email list. This was important for two reasons – we felt a personal invitation would encourage more people to participate, and we wanted to hear from a variety of voices, including those that often stay silent due to the large size of UUCA.

The Communications Group of the UUCA Board of Trustees (Warren Wright, Janice Morris, Andrea Ryon, and Paula Bendl Smith) met with randomly selected congregants on **January 12, January 14, March 4, April 1, April 27, April 29, and June 3**. Each two-hour session ranged in size from 10-30 people and in all we had 96 participants and 12 facilitators.

To start off each session, Warren talked about the Circles of Trust (COT) concept and shared the COT Touchstones that are vital to this type of personal sharing. (*See Circles of Touchstones below*). Then Warren explained the difference between ego and soul stories. (*See explanation of Ego vs. Soul Stories below*.) Afterwards we broke down into small groups of 3-4 (with a Board member facilitating each group) to discuss the importance of vulnerability in learning about ourselves, in building trusting relationships to create bonds between people, and in developing a foundation for trust across our church.

Each person was asked to reflect and share their thoughts regarding **three questions**:

- Share a time in your own life when you did something that required you to be vulnerable.
- Tell about an experience of vulnerability connected with the church.
- How could UUCA help encourage vulnerability, and by extension, trust?

After the small group discussions ended everyone came back together briefly to assess the effectiveness of the exercise and to talk about some of the overarching insights that resulted. We explained that everything spoken in a Circle of Trust is confidential and no comments would be attributed to individuals outside of the small group. What would be shared, however, were the deeper understandings we learned. These thoughts, feelings, insights and ideas about how to bring UUCA closer to meeting our

Ends have been used to write this report and to guide the Board in their work to reflect the congregation's thoughts and feelings about becoming a "being" church as much as a "doing" church.

## **TAKEAWAYS FROM THE WONDERING OUT LOUD EXPERIENCE**

**THERE IS A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FEELING VULNERABLE AND BECOMING VULNERABLE:** Oftentimes when we think of vulnerability we remember what it feels like to be in a vulnerable situation – facing change, overcoming challenges, feeling like we can't measure up, needing support, feeling judged, and experiencing self-doubt. Making ourselves vulnerable is stepping out into the unknown, reaching out to others without knowing how they will respond, saying yes when asked to step up and do something, and letting others know that you might need to ask for help.

**SHARING ALLOWS FOR IMMEDIATE BONDING:** What surprised us most was how easy it was for each member in the small group to share some of their most powerful stories with each other, and how opening up to someone you just met proved freeing and created an immediate bond. Many felt they walked away from the exercise having developed new relationships and friendships with the people that they met – even though the interaction was brief.

**SMALL GROUPS OFFER INSTANT CONNECTIONS:** Another important learning was the power of small groups and how valuable they are to making instant connections. The key, though, was in the open sharing that allowed the group members to come to understand and empathize with each other right away.

**BEING VULNERABLE IS RISKY – ESPECIALLY IF YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT KIND OF RESPONSE YOU WILL GET:** Several people asked the question, which comes first – trust or vulnerability? Many felt that people would not be inclined to open up without trust, and the belief that the person with whom you were sharing your vulnerability would be understanding and caring.

**IT IS HARDER FOR INTROVERTS TO SHARE:** More than one participant talked about how hard it was to walk into Fellowship Hall after the service and talk to people. Introverts find it harder to connect and feel belonged and cared for by others in that atmosphere, and appreciate other opportunities being provided.

**MANY OF US SHARE THE SAME VULNERABILITIES:** By sharing, we were quick to learn that many of our vulnerabilities are the same – guilt surrounding our failures, hesitancy to try something new, challenges with family members or work-related issues, grief over the loss of loved ones, and fears that we won't live up to others' expectations. By sharing our struggles with each other, we open up opportunities to learn and grow from each other and know that we are not alone in facing difficulties.

**LETTING OURSELVES BE VULNERABLE LEADS TO MORE FULFILLING LIFE EXPERIENCES.** Stepping out on that ledge can be scary, but starting something new and taking a chance can be very rewarding. Sharing can open up deeper communications with family, friends, and even people we have just met. Embracing vulnerability can lead to healing and even if the outcome is not what we might have

expected, the act of following our hearts will lead to personal growth and the potential for transformation and long term happiness. We often discover we have courage we never knew we had.

## **KEY LEARNINGS FOR UUCA**

When asked about an experience of vulnerability connected with the church, the responses were profoundly positive and at other times discouragingly negative. Many have had moments of enlightenment and emotion after hearing a particularly powerful sermon, or have developed long-term bonds with colleagues in their Covenant Groups. Others mentioned stepping out of their comfort zone to join the choir, or asking for help from the RE community for children with special needs and receiving a supportive response. For example, one person talked about feeling connected after sharing during Joys and Sorrows, and another shared about reaching out to church friends after a cancer diagnosis.

Others felt let down when they needed help or reached out for help and it was not there – they fell ill and no one noticed they were not coming to church; they talked to church leaders but didn't feel heard; or they felt their work to advance a stated goal of the church was not being well-received. A few said they felt the church was insular and unfriendly when they first started coming and it took a long time for them to feel included. Others said just coming to church alone made them feel vulnerable. And some noted one of their greatest moments of vulnerability at UUCA was the fact that they came to the Wondering Out Loud session when they weren't quite sure what they were getting themselves into.

When asked about how UUCA could encourage vulnerability, and by extension, trust, there were many helpful responses. Some felt we should continue the Wondering Out Loud sessions beyond the project initiated by the Board. Many of the participants cited the Covenant Groups and that **small group experience** as fundamental to providing opportunities for sharing their vulnerabilities. However, because Covenant Groups are a time-consuming commitment, many thought we needed to create small group experiences to help build relationships that brought people together one event at a time. They also suggested it would be preferable if the events were not “task-oriented” – no asks!

Someone mentioned that in addition to allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, we need to train the people in our congregation to be **good listeners** who invite sharing without fear of judgment or fixing or saving. People need to know it is ok to share their “shadow” side – when they are hurting or life is not easy – and not just feel they have to impress people with their accomplishments. Another person mentioned the importance of **breaking down divisions** – between the 9:15 /11:15 services, the upstairs/downstairs, the young/old, and the diverse/non-diverse communities.

Many felt it was incumbent on the church to make it **easier for people to find a group or activity** to join to help them feel more connected. Some felt that fostering mentoring situations with newer members was important. They felt the art of personal invitation was a good model to follow, especially when drawing introverts into the church.

It was also critical that the church and its **leaders model vulnerability**. Numerous people felt the special service held after election night was a good example of giving people a chance to come together in a healing space. Leading in times of controversy and acting together for social justice helped further to

create bonds. Having a strong pastoral care program holds members accountable for looking out for each other.

**Communication** was an important foundation for building trust and vulnerability. Participants wanted to see broader sharing of information and more input into decision making. They wanted to know that if they reached out to church leadership that they would get a response. “Being heard” builds trust as does being asked what you think. Greater transparency closes off opportunities for misinformation being disseminated and helps people to feel included. One person suggested holding listening sessions when major issues or transitions arise in the church.

The point was made that we need to **meet people where they are**. Having more ways to learn about each other helps to sustain relationships. Some felt they lost their connection to the church after their children grew up and moved away. Others would meet someone new in the church but then never see them again. Creating opportunities to build ongoing relationships was seen as a way to make a big church feel like a small church – and as a result make people feel more connected and thus more willing to share.

Other ideas that were suggested:

- Creating a StoryCorps-type project so people could share and learn more about each other.
- Create an activity fair for people to sign up for things which interest them.
- Have congregants do TED talks and put them up on the website.
- Have presentations outside of the annual meeting to share the goals of the church.
- Support the concept of “First Friends” program to reach out to newcomers.
- Pass out “to do” tasks so people feel needed. Invite people to help – don’t always wait for them to volunteer.
- Create events around food and hospitality – bring people together just to socialize.
- Make sure people know that Helping Hands exists and that they can ask for help if they need it.
- Showcase examples of personal lives where vulnerability has led to positive outcomes.
- Provide time for RE parents to socialize after the service before having to pick up their children in RE.
- Be deliberate in creating unique ways and opportunities to help introverts integrate into the church.
- Allow for brainstorming – cultivate creativity.
- Bring together small, mixed groups by invitation. Advertise small group opportunities more in Connections and from the pulpit.
- Create ways to make it easier to navigate Fellowship Hall.
- Have more cross-pollination between groups in the church – interact with each other. Don’t allow ourselves to create silos.

## **CONCLUSION**

At one of our first meetings, a relative newcomer to the church reminded us that WE are the church and it is our responsibility to carry out the task of creating the church we want to see. If we want to encourage vulnerability and build trust, we must recognize that being vulnerable ourselves allows others to do the same. To build trust, it will be incumbent upon each and every one of us to listen to others without judgment and invite people to be their honest selves knowing that the response they receive will be caring and supportive.

### *Circle of Trust Touchstones*

- ***Extend and receive welcome.*** People learn best in hospitable spaces. In a circle of trust we support each other's learning by giving and receiving hospitality.
- ***Be present as fully as possible.*** Be here with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your convictions, joys and successes, your listening as well as your speaking.
- ***What is offered in the circle is by invitation, not demand.*** This is not a "share or die" event! During this circle, do whatever your soul calls for, and know that you do it with our support. Your soul knows your needs better than we do.
- ***Speak your truth in ways that respect other people's truth.*** Our views of reality may differ, but speaking one's truth in a circle of trust does not mean interpreting, correcting or debating what others say. Speak from your center to the center of the circle, using "I" statements, trusting people to do their own sifting and winnowing.
- ***No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no correcting each other.*** This is one of the hardest guidelines for those in the "helping professions." But it is vital to welcoming the soul, to making space for the inner teacher.
- ***Learn to respond to others with open, honest questions*** instead of counsel, corrections, etc. With such questions, we help "hear each other into deeper speech."
- ***When the going gets rough, turn to wonder.*** If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment to listen to others – and to yourself – more deeply.
- ***Attend to your own inner teacher.*** We learn from others, of course. But as we explore stories, poems, questions and silence in a circle of trust, we have a special opportunity to learn from within. So pay close attention to your own reactions and responses, to your most important teacher.
- ***Trust and learn from silence.*** Silence is a gift in our noisy world, and a way of knowing in itself. Treat silence as a member of the group. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.
- ***Observe deep confidentiality.*** Nothing said in a circle of trust will ever be repeated to other people.
- ***Know that it's possible*** to leave the circle with whatever it was that you needed when you arrived, and that the seeds planted here can keep growing in the days ahead.

## EGO STORIES & SOUL STORIES

### EGO STORIES

- Are stories told for the sake of self-promotion, as when we apply for a job
- Focus on life's high spots when we have been successful & affirmed
- Try to portray us as in control or in charge of our lives
- Are often linear stories of continuity and consistency, stories that have a resolution
- Are highly crafted stories that leave out important things
- May ignore or falsify certain information by "spinning" the facts
- Are always told in prose, and sometimes involve numbers
- Are stories that do not sustain us in times of suffering
- Are stories we tell at a party when someone asks, "What do you do?"

*"Produce! Get results! Make money! Make friends! Make Changes! Or you will die of despair!"*

- Chuang Tzu

*Marcy Jackson and Parker J. Palmer,*

*April 2011*

### SOUL STORIES

- Are "the story beneath the ego story," the one with the thread of truth running through it
- Honor shadow as well as light, suffering as well as gladness
- Are often stories of twists & turns when our best-laid plans were undone by the unexpected
- Allow us to integrate the fragments of the whole
- Are unafraid of change, fear, loss, failure & shame, or mystery, passion & ecstasy
- Are sometimes told in poetry, music, or art
- Are stories that we can hold onto in the hardest of times
- Are the stories we want the people we love most to know
- Are the stories we are most likely to be reliving when we are awake at 3:00 am or when we die

*"Joy and sorrow aren't two different feelings for it, it attends to us only when the two are joined."*

- Wislawa Szymborska