

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, there have been people who have valued using compassion in actions, the right of conscience in decisions, and doubt in communities of faith. Some of these people were Unitarians, believing in something sacred while unsure of the divided nature of that sacred being. Some of these people were Universalists, believing that Love ultimately saved all of us, that our divisions as humans were to be celebrated and not denied. And some of these people have been Unitarian Universalists, a faith that has grown up and grown out of these two historical traditions.

As Unitarian Universalists, our faith is built on a foundation that encourages openness rather than doctrine. We believe that ultimately all are held by love, sometimes a love that we as humans can't understand or offer. We believe that truth is not defined by one person or one book, but rather truth is open to continual revelation. And yet, our faith has boundaries. Being open to continual revelation is different than believing that everything is truth; we understand that we bear some responsibility for our actions, positive and negative, creative and destructive.

Because of our openness to truth, we cannot simply rest on traditions – our faith calls us to speak from our experience and to understand that truth is also found in the past. We are constantly challenged to contradict ourselves, because, as Whitman wrote, we contain multitudes.

Some foundational parts of modern Unitarian Universalism rest in these building blocks (adapted from James Luther Adams):

- We are open to new truths.
- We learn those truths by building relationships and community together.
- We are called to make this world a more just place.
- Human beings have great power in shaping our world.
- Hope wins out over despair.

The most difficult part of being a Unitarian Universalist is that our foundation can feel like quicksand, where we never quite find our religious footing. That's where our churches come in, offering a ministry that connects us to the generations who have come before, the generations that are with us now, and to the generations who are still to come, all bound by a common faith created through different expressions.

This is the foundation for Second Unitarian Church of Omaha's ministry, now and for the years ahead. Our city and our world needs a religious community founded on openness, questioning, relationships, and optimism.

Why A Strategic Plan?

In spring of 2012, the Second Unitarian Church of Omaha consulted with Dave Rickard, a growth consultant with the Unitarian Universalist Association. Dave had worked with our congregation over the previous decade, guiding us to realize our desire to move beyond our current physical space.

Over the years since his first visit, our church has undergone a significant change in how we relate to one another. Over time, members of Second Unitarian have been asked to covenant together as a religious community, seeking answers and living with doubt and diversity, growing in generosity and gratitude, and working together to build a Unitarian Universalist community for West Omaha.

One of Dave Rickard's recommendations, as we sought to strengthen and grow our ministry, was to create a strategic plan that offered a path for the vision of our church. Dave explained that the Board was responsible for articulating the mission and vision of our church, and another group would need to do the work of creating a plan for the next several years.

A strategic plan was approved by the congregation in 2004. Dave strongly encouraged an update to the plan at the time of his most recent visit. A group of volunteers recruited by the Board was approved by congregational vote to learn about the church and offer a reflection of where we are and where we should head. The volunteers are Carol Johnson, Steve Abraham, Rich McArdle, Stephanie Peterson, and Craig Piquette. This group has met regularly with Rev. Scott McNeill since September 2012.

Through a series of house meetings and many one-to-one conversations, the planning group listened to the congregation. The group found guidance and inspiration from many sources: we read about growing congregations; we studied the processes that facilitate healthy growth and the pitfalls that impede growth; and, we looked at the history of Second Unitarian Omaha and the hopes of the many who have supported its ministry.

It is our hope to reflect back what we have learned, as well as to offer a path forward to achieve the mission of our church.

What is the Mission of Our Church?

In 2012, the Board of Second Unitarian, through many discussions with its members, found these words to articulate the mission of our church:

to be Authentic, Compassionate and Transformative
in our lives, in our faith, and in our world.

How our church lives out this mission will vary over time. At this moment, the Board and the Strategic Planning Committee have a vision of how we might proceed in the near future.

The Path Forward

We learned that there are some characteristics that specifically define Unitarian Universalist religious communities. And, we learned that some qualities are shared by all thriving religious communities.

When we looked at Second Unitarian Church of Omaha in the light of what we learned, one particular fact came to our attention again and again:

In order to grow and thrive, the members and staff of Second Unitarian Church of Omaha must clearly articulate and fully understand our evolving common community identity.

This identity is fed by our religious tradition, informed by our mission, and shaped by our covenants. It must be strongly articulated by our leaders in cooperation with our professional staff. It must be clearly and tirelessly communicated to our members. The congregation must understand it, take ownership of it, and project it to the larger community.

Churches with strong identities empower their professional staff to design and run programs that further the mission of the church. Their governing boards shepherd the church's resources and oversee the mission. Their members are able to bring their time, talents and treasure to the community with a clear understanding of what their gifts are supporting. They feel that they are working for something larger than themselves.

Becoming a New Church

Your planning group entered into the planning process with a keen awareness of the congregation's longing for physical spaces that will better accommodate our growing programs and the mobility needs of all members and visitors. Every member of the planning group shares the desire to fulfill that longing. What we have learned in our year of study and conversation is this:

In order to put ourselves in a position to occupy a new building, we must first become a reNEWed church. That renewal will be evident when we have achieved a shared common identity as a vibrant and dynamic religious community ready to transform the world. This reNEWed church needs a firm foundation. There are a number of measures that must be taken in order to build that foundation.

First, we must understand what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist religious community. We must live out our mission through every program, showing the larger community who we are and what we do.

Second, today's leaders of Second Unitarian Church of Omaha must be willing to build a religious community that we will not, ultimately, control. We must model leadership in service to the identity and mission of the Church. We must articulate the ways that the church we want to build will embody authenticity and compassion, and then empower our staff to design and run programs that facilitate the transformation of our individual and communal lives, and of the world around us.

Finally, every member of Second Unitarian Church of Omaha must commit to learn and grow through their participation in the community. We must pledge our time, talents and treasure to our individual and communal spiritual growth, and to the building of our reNEWed church.

This strategic plan focuses upon strategies that we believe will contribute to the building of a reNEWed church. Some of these strategies address the community's contribution to the maturational growth of our members and their families. Some address the continuing maturational growth of Second Unitarian Church of Omaha as an organization. Some strategies address the growth and development of our shared ministries.

The strong common thread woven through every aspect of this plan is the transformation of Second Unitarian into a reNEWed church—a Unitarian Universalist religious community with a strong and ever-evolving common community identity that empowers our people, inspires our neighbors, and changes our world for the better.

Building a Covenanted Community

Within a religious organization, everything we do is done in relationship. The covenant, which holds us in right relationship, is integral to our common identity. Every interaction must reflect the covenant we have with each other. Without covenant, we will do no great works.

In order to be in covenant with others in our community, we need to understand our personal stories better. We also need to better understand the stories of our

fellow Unitarian Universalists. Ideally, church programs and services must engage people in understanding that they have a story to tell, and in learning to appropriately listen to the stories of people with whom they are in community.

We need to create events through which we can share our stories and build on the excitement that is created by working together for a common ideal. Through our stories, we will see how each of us is called to contribute to the life of the community, and we will know how we can help one another grow. Then we will begin to visualize how we will come together as a community to change the world.

A sustained renewal will be facilitated when our religious community comes together annually to revisit our strategic plan, and to renew our vows to each other and to our mission.

This strategic plan is intended to be a dynamic, living document. As such, it should be read intentionally, with our covenant in mind, realizing that through it, our spirit will be reNEWed and our vision become real.

THE PLAN

GOAL: Maturation Growth at a Personal Level

Individuals come to a faith community with a need to grow personally – to transform ourselves spiritually. Our strategic plan must outline how we will enable personal growth in the coming years.

Much has been done since the last strategic plan laid out objectives for “Membership Growth and Development”. A number of small groups are sustaining and growing. Our worship services are at the center of faith development opportunities. Worship has expanded to two Sunday services, with professional quality programming. The church has also expanded outreach programs, and begun to develop intergenerational outreach activities. These groups are outlets for community action and vehicles for personal growth and development.

These positive developments are balanced by the realization that we have much more to do. Our physical facilities are in need of considerable updating and improvements. We have not sustained a strategy for formal religious education and faith development across the lifespan. We have been inconsistent in our efforts to engage visitors and new members in existing programming. Most importantly, our expectations for membership have fallen short of calling us to full participation in the life of the congregation.

Strategy 1 Strengthen Sunday mornings at Second Unitarian as a place and time to gather in community and grow in spirit.

Rationale - Our community comes together on Sunday to celebrate our common identity and to renew our covenant to help each other heal, grow and renew through our shared spiritual experience. Such an important event deserves our commitment, our attention and our resources.

Tactic 1 - Support the availability of professional, high-quality worship services by committing adequate resources (staff compensation, volunteer training, materials, etc.)

Tactic 2 - Prioritize the beauty and accessibility of our physical facilities.

Strategy 2 Develop strong religious education programs for the whole community.

Rationale - As humans, we grow through learning and through teaching. We learn from our elders and pass our values and knowledge of the world on to our children and the generations that follow. As members of a growing and learning

religious community, we have an obligation to bring our knowledge and resources to support religious growth and learning for all ages.

Tactic 1 - Implement formal faith development/religious education program for children, teens and adults. Hire adequate professional staff to create and facilitate a program that promotes UU principles and is tailored to congregational needs.

Tactic 2 - Develop a 5-year rotating curriculum plan for all ages, including UU history/identity and church leadership skills.

Tactic 3 - Establish the means and methods for regular evaluation of religious education programs.

Tactic 4 - Expand community service projects to promote intergenerational communication and shared ministry

Strategy 3 Make personal ministry a requirement of membership

Rationale - Love is the spirit of this church. John Lennon said “And in the end, the love you get is equal to the love you give.” Khalil Gibran said “It is when you give of yourself that you truly give.” These two statements summarize the imperative that membership requires a small sacrifice of self for the greater love within the community. That is personal ministry. Within an established culture of abundance, members will contribute time, talent and treasure to fulfill the mission of the church

Tactic 1 - Expect new and established adult members to commit to:

- regular Sunday morning attendance
- staying informed about congregational life through church communications
- ongoing participation in at least one small group or committee
- an annual financial pledge proportional to their circumstances
- attendance or participation in at least one social justice or community outreach activity, personal development program or other sanctioned church program annually
- making a contribution to the education and welfare of our community’s children and youth
- Making a contribution to the care of our members in need

Tactic 2 - Expand the role of Professional Connections Coordinator to include facilitation of members fulfilling their commitments.

GOAL: Maturation Growth at the Organizational Level

In the years since the last long range plan, Second Unitarian has made great strides in improving its organizational structure and working through some of the difficulties of the transition from a lay-led organization to one of strong professional ministry and leadership. In the past five years, the congregation has developed and passed a covenant of right relations and has transitioned to two services. It has approved a new mission statement and has made a number of changes to the organizational lay leadership structure. The church is on a firmer financial footing. We have reached out to the community with personnel and monetary resources. Great strides have been made. Now, the congregation is ready for the next challenge as we transition from a small close-knit family-like church to an organization that can project its values to the greater Omaha community.

In order to do so, Second Unitarian needs a leadership structure which is more expansive and meaningful for the entire congregation.

Strategy 1 Redesign the organizational structure of the church, so that it is inclusive of more members and more open to change.

Rationale - Realizing that each person owns a part of the truth, committees and groups will see it as their job to make room for more people.

Tactic 1 - Establish and practice term limits for committee membership.

Tactic 2 - Establish succession plans for committee leaders, providing for one year of apprenticeship, followed by one year of leadership, and a final year of holding institutional memory in an emeritus position.

Tactic 3 - Increase the value of Program Council meetings by increasing inter-committee collaboration, for example, asking two committees to work together to create a joint program or project.

Tactic 4 - Engage committees in acts of radical hospitality to welcome all members as they fulfill their commitment to personal ministry.

Tactic 5 - Establish a culture of trust. Within that culture, the Board will be the visionary body/guiding force that shepherds the church's resources and oversees the mission. Professional staff will be empowered by the Board to design and run programs that further the mission of the church. Volunteers will bring their time, talents and treasure to those programs with a clear understanding of what their gifts are supporting.

Strategy 2 Continue to strengthen the financial foundation of the church

Rationale - Within an established culture of abundance, members will contribute time, talent and treasure to fulfill the mission of the church

Tactic 1 - Change rules of membership to require a pledge annually.

Tactic 2 - Assign stewards to canvas members and friends who pledge at similar levels to encourage greater giving.

Tactic 3 - Increase growth of the Endowment Fund by holding an annual Endowment Sunday

Tactic 4 - Improve communications about micro-lending by Endowment Committee

GOAL: Shared Ministry

Ministry means making daily choices about money, time and space.
Ministry, to put it simply, is the active, “doing” aspect of the congregation.
-Dan Hotchkiss

Shared ministry creates a congregational culture in which each member is invited to participate in ministry and helped to do so through proven systems and processes.
-Judith Urban

Shared Ministry is about building good relationships both within the congregation and with others outside our congregation. The members of Second Unitarian Church of Omaha share ministry among our members and with our professional staff. We join in ministry with the Unitarian Universalist Association and with local institutions with whom we share issues and concerns, such as Omaha Together One Community.

There are many ways we develop this sense of shared ministry. We have covenants in place, encouraging people to explore what they value and how they will work together. Covenants are important to developing a sense of shared ministry because they uphold right relations as a critical component of all that we do together.

Second Unitarian Church has an established presence in the community through its long term commitment and participation in Omaha Together One Community and through the offering of an Open Arms Group for transgender persons and their families by the LGBTQ Welcoming Congregation Team.

Our Pathways to Membership Class encourages visitors and members to engage in the different ministries of the church, knowing that we each bring different skills and passions to this religious community. Through this class, new members are invited and encouraged to share their talents and treasures with the church community so that we may be transformed by their presence, and they might be transformed through ours.

Continuing development of Second Unitarian's shared ministries will require focused leadership development, improved internal communication systems, and a marshaling of our valuable resources toward a common purpose.

Strategy 1 Offer mentoring, training and support for congregational leaders and for specific ministries within the congregation

Rationale - Training and mentoring leaders empowers them to make lasting and deep contributions to the ministries of the congregation.

Tactic 1 - Develop a plan to identify and develop congregational leaders to promote the mission of the congregation.

Tactic 2 - Whenever possible, implement short-term, time limited, job-defined ministries.

Tactic 3 - Support members' attendance at Unitarian Universalist-sponsored institutes, seminars, conferences, workshops and camps to develop understanding and skills for leading church ministries.

Strategy 2 Regularly and publicly commit to our ministry together by integrating the various parts of ministry into our individual lives and in our church.

Rationale - By coming together regularly, intentionally and publicly to tell our story and to listen to those of others, we hope to demonstrate that we are doing hard self-reflective work and our church encourages us to keep learning and growing. By sharing those stories in community, we engage in ministries that speak to us in fulfilling our calling but also transform us by showing us how our lives and ministries are connected to the lives and ministries of others.

To be most effective in achieving change in our world, we strive to invest our resources (time, talent, monies and energies) in a more focused way to enable us to see the results of our ministry. We do this in community because partnerships and coalitions become increasingly important in our work to transform ourselves and the world.

Tactic 1: Establish a weekend where members and staff of the church connect with one another, covenanting together on the ministry they plan to fulfill. This might include reviewing and creating (or recreating) covenants, celebrating successes and reflecting and creating goals, and committing to give of our time, talent and treasure in amounts reflecting the church's value in our lives. This would hopefully be a chance to schedule some events, or start to map out the year ahead and to see what committees we need to work with, etc.

Tactic 2: Expand opportunities to regularly share our stories of ministry and build circles of trust to foster growth of those ministries.

Tactic 3: Implement full integration of different aspects of our ministries – with a well-defined, community-supported focus on creating justice in our world, our church will grow by identifying ways that we can connect and serve the larger world. We will strengthen our justice work through integrating the ideas of justice in our worship, through our religious growth and learning program, and through the other programs of our church.

Long-Range Vision: Our ReNEWed Church

With a vibrant and welcoming Sunday morning experience, the church will promote members' ongoing faith development and continue to attract newcomers in search of religious community. By facilitating religious growth and learning across the lifespan, the church will inspire individuals to identify as Unitarian Universalist. By calling members to full participation in congregational life, the church will make the strongest possible contribution to the maturational growth of individual members.

As we grow to become a thriving, program sized church, all groups and committees will make room for new people and the ideas and resources they bring. Everyone in the church community will have easy access to information about the church and its programs, and all of that information will clearly reflect our shared values, and will highlight opportunities to connect with others.

All members will have the capacity to articulate the mission of Second Unitarian Church and to identify their role in the achievement of that mission. The church will have a broader presence in the Omaha area, where it is known to be Authentic, Compassionate and Transformative.

A sustained renewal will be facilitated when our religious community comes together annually to revisit our strategic plan, and to renew our vows to each other and to our mission.

A church that calls its people to be Authentic, Caring and Transformative is one that is open, encouraging its members to become involved and engaged, loving and loved, changing and changed. Committees will not want for volunteers and ideas, Program Council will not lack for hands to fulfill our calling through the work of the church.

The congregation will know what the church needs to do, and what kinds of space(s) are needed to house that work. We will be prepared to identify and occupy that space.

Together, the people of the church will change ourselves and in doing so, will be able to change the world.