

Focus Group Summaries

Overview and Assessment of the First Focus Group

Scenario No. 1: UUCOV is located on 5 acres in what is rapidly becoming a center of the Venice community. Periodically suggestions are made about how to make wise use of our site. Question: How would you like to see our congregation make maximum use of its property

Analysis

The participants seemed to agree that UUCOV should decide how it wants to use the property for itself before it decides to lease or sell any part of the property to another group. There was not a strong sentiment or support for giving or leasing property to the Blue Lotus Temple. There were several strong statements in favor of building a fellowship hall that we could share with the Buddhists or use for community events and dinners. Some saw it as a money-maker and others saw it as a way of enhancing our presence in the community. There was some discussion about developing a community garden, too. Several participants had questions about the easement giving access to IVMS.

The following is a list of the comments:

Get rid of ties with IVMS

UUCOV needs more meeting space!

Need multi-use space that offers flexibility.

Community garden.

Labyrinth.

We should know “where we are going” before we “give” land away.

Joint use facility.

Question selling of property at this time.

Scenario No. 2 In Venice where the median age is 69.1, UUCOV’s most active members are even older: Board of Trustees: 86% (6/7) older than 69; Coordinating Council: 82% (9/11) older than 69. Teams & committees are comprised similarly. Those of us in our 70’s are closing in on our expiration date. Question: How should UUCOV address this situation?

Analysis

There was no clear trend that emerged from the discussion. There was ample discussion about doing things to attract younger families but there was a clear recognition that we primarily attract older individuals. Several people expressed some “confusion” about the role of the DRE and noted that we currently do not have very many children in the program.

The following is a list of the comments:

Need a multi pronged approach to bring in different groups.

To attract younger people you need programming for parents.

Leadership of youth is very important.
Follow up young parents to find out why they left.
How do we attract young retirees?
Start small.
Have more conversations to attract volunteers.

Scenario No. 3: Many people seem unaware of what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes when a visitor introduces themselves at a service they declare they “never knew” such a church existed. Question: How could UUCOV and UU become better known in the community?

Analysis

There was general agreement that the public does not know very much about UU or UUCOV and several suggestions were made about what we can do. One person strongly urged that UUCOV appoint or hire a “community outreach/PR person” whose job would be to promote UUCOV and reach out to and educate the community. There was agreement that Community Forum events were helpful in engaging the wider community in Venice. There was no consensus about one thing that would be helpful.

The following are some of the suggestions:

We have been told that we are very intellectual but we don’t do a good job explaining who we are.

Community Outreach (PR) person is needed.

Need more communication to the community about what we are doing.

Build a Fellowship Hall and invite the community.

Offer consistent events, like Meatless Mondays, and invite the community.

New Community Forum is one way of reaching out to involve community.

Educate while you entertain or feed.

Open the campus.

Scenario No. 4:

Each year UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years a small percentage of those who pledge have supported the bulk of the expenses. Consider this year, the top 10 pledges covered almost a third of the proposed budget, and the people behind these pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit. Question: What strategies should UUCOV adopt to address a weakened financial outlook?

Analysis

There were those in the room who were more knowledgeable about our finances and there were those at the other end of the spectrum. When told that UUCOV by-laws did not require a financial contribution, several participants were amazed. Currently, someone only must sign the book to become a member and many do so without attending a Pathways class where they would learn what have become usual UUCOV procedures. There seemed to be general

agreement that emphasis on contributing should be placed at the beginning of membership and that there even should be an orientation for new members that includes a discussion of the importance of generosity.

The following are some of the suggestions:

We don't like talking about money.

We should talk about generosity.

Need to be more open.

Need to ask better questions in a better way (i.e., what percentage of your income to contribute.)

Attracted because UUCOV didn't talk about dollars but supported backpack kids.

Young people would bring in more dollars.

Young people don't have money & don't go to church.

Should give out pledge distribution sheets and income levels.

We need mandatory new member orientation that discusses need for generosity.

What happened to kick-off parties?

What about stewardship visits?

People need more information about finances.

Scenario No. 5: For several years UUCOV's Social Justice efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UUs take very seriously, such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights and abortion rights. Question: How should the congregation respond?

Analysis

There was general agreement that UUCOV should identify one primary social justice issue to promote, but at the same time we should continue to support the issues we have, i.e. hunger and homelessness. There was no agreement what the new issue should be but strong suggestion it might deal with climate change was acknowledged. Whatever the topic chosen, sentiment was expressed that it should have immediate effect locally. The emphasis was on developing as many activities as possible to enable more congregants to participate. All activities would or should be coordinated to support the central issue.

The following are some of the suggestions:

Don't give up on hungry & homeless.

Combine with other activities that invite people to become active.

Stand your ground when an issue is identified.

Should choose one dominant effort to support something local where efforts can be seen to make a difference.

Sponsor projects where all can be active.

Monetary support is essential.

Simplify the process of choosing.

There is a definite NEED to talk about issues.
Forums can play a role.
Activities build a community.
Focus on one area that will have local impact.

Scenario No. 6: In reference to spirituality, Michael Durall writes, “The prevailing culture in too many UU congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend. Parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed, and entertained — but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose.” (The Almost Church, Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2006) Two part Question: 1. Does this quote describe UUCOV? 2. What part should or does spirituality play in the life of UUCOV?

Analysis

Although there was some discussion about the definition of the word “spirituality” there was general agreement that UUCOV does not do enough in this area. There was recognition that Linda Underwood’s meetings on spirituality were welcome and useful. There were also some strong statements that there should be more sermons on spiritual issues and sermons that address what people are feeling in times of distress. One member expressed surprise that there has not been a sermon on issues related to the war in the Ukraine.

The following is a list of some of the comments:

Need more emphasis on spirituality. E.g., Book “Everyday Spiritual Practice.”
Unanimous agreement on need for more spirituality.
Build Your Own Theology.
Religious education of children: they need a mission and purpose.
What does spirituality mean?
Sermons address other topics, not spirituality.
Music prompts more spirituality.
Need more call to action.
Need something to feed my soul.
What can we influence locally?
Do we deal with issues?

General Impression:

We consider this first session to be a success and there is not much that I could recommend changing it. We allowed approximately 15 minutes per question and we completed everything within 2 hours. We recommend that we continue to use the current format without any major changes.

We want to emphasize that the participants were extremely pleased that they had an opportunity to participate in this discussion and several expressed a desire for more opportunities like this one.

The following is a short list of questions that we would like the team to discuss. These questions were developed because of what we learned from the focus group.

1. Timing – What is the timeline for completion of the project as that will impact the selection and holding focus groups?
2. How many focus groups are planned? Eleven focus groups will represent 33% of the congregation and the results will have some statistical significance.
3. Choosing participants to be in focus groups v. volunteering to be in a group.
4. Zoom focus groups v. face to face.
5. Using the same questions and format in the Survey Monkey v. providing a list of questions.

Respectfully submitted by:

Bev Morrison and Rich Cannarelli

Overview and Assessment of the Second Focus Group (8-17-2022)
Beverly Morrison and Barb Gundy - facilitators
(Summary presented in order of discussion by focus group)

Scenario No. 4: Each year UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years a small percentage of those who pledge have supported the bulk of the expenses. Consider this year, the top 10 pledges covered almost a third of the proposed budget, and the people behind these pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit.

Question: What strategies should UUCOV adopt to address a weakened financial outlook?

Analysis: Discussion started with some long-time UUCOV members describing former pledge events as more interactive and intense, and with wider congregant participation. Most of the discussion centered around ways to increase donations such as increased membership and visibility rather than how to conduct a pledge drive. One participant stated that donations should be steered toward the general fund rather than special gifts (e.g., memorials, honoraria, special projects), but acknowledging special gifts in a more public/high profile manner was also expressed as important. Generally, participants expressed the need to receive more financial information, and to hold more conversations around finances including those with new people attending UUCOV. Viewing donations in a positive perspective rather than as an obligation is important.

Focus Group Responses:

- Pledge drives are less intensive than in the past. There was more participation and a philosophy of everyone contributing. Solicitation for funding took place only during pledge drive.
- Follow UUA Guidelines
- Increase membership
- Increase visibility
- Utilize campus to increase visibility
- Make fund raising fun
- Build stronger community
- Share more information re: financial status of the church
- Place more emphasis on general fund rather than special gifts
- Highlight legacy fund
- Recognition of special gifts
- Personal engagement with newcomers about pledging & finances
- Frame contributing as an opportunity for them to give to something they really care about
- Social event to acknowledge contributions/special gifts that is sponsored by church, not person/group giving the money

Scenario No. 2: In Venice where the median age is 69.1, UUCOV's most active members are even older: Board of Trustees: 86% (6/7) older than 69; Coordinating Council: 82% (9/11) older than 69. Teams & committees are comprised similarly. Those of us in our 70's are closing in on our expiration date.

Question: How should UUCOV address this situation?

Analysis: Participants expressed that there is not available age data related to the general congregation. Most of the discussion centered around UUCOV campus' visibility as well as UUCOV's community visibility as means to raise awareness of the congregation and to attract new members. Two participants expressed that families with children are likely not the easiest

demographic group to attract and that more easily accessed groups may be newer retirees or older workers (e.g., working from home, consulting) who are moving into the area.

Focus Group Responses:

- What about the percentage of those at younger ages?
- Ask newcomers to participate
- Share enthusiasm for membership
- Update publicity
- Community out-reach to those who move into area
- Offer more educational opportunities
- Aim efforts at newly retired
- Families with children may not play to our strengths
- Increase visibility of campus with strategic lighting at night

Scenario No. 3: Many people seem unaware of what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes when a visitor introduces themselves at a service they declare they “never knew” such a church existed. **Question:** How could UUCOV and UU become better known in the community

Analysis: This discussion revolved around how UUCOV could be more visible using specific marketing, especially through outside social and educational groups. Secondly, UUCOV visibility could be raised by hosting special programs that are proportional to and can be accommodated by our campus facilities. Many of the marketing suggestions were ideas that UUCOV had previously used but are not currently active for myriad reasons. There was a lack of suggestions about the use of newer, or more innovative technologies and how they might help with UUCOV visibility.

Focus Group Responses:

- Chamber of Commerce will display information we supply
- Post an “advertorial” in Chamber of Commerce magazine
- Sponsor SILL as a way to get our name out
- Offer programs proportional to facility site
- Great Decisions
- Publicity for Socrates Cafe & Plato’s Circle
- Participation with Venice Interfaith Community Association
- Get UU minister on monthly Gondolier article
- Secular groups

Scenario No. 6: In reference to spirituality, Michael Durall writes, “The prevailing culture in too many UU congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend. Parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed, and entertained — but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose.” (The Almost Church, Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2006)

Questions: 1. Does this quote describe UUCOV? 2. What part should or does spirituality play in the life of UUCOV?

Analysis: The first response to this question was that one of the participants did not like the term “spirituality” so that set up some discussion about the definition of the term, but without clear resolution. The use of “purpose and meaning” was suggested as an alternative. There seemed to be a shared feeling that there should be more sermons on spirituality. Several statements about music came up during the discussion; therefore, it appears that there is a shared feeling that music plays a role in spirituality. Questions regarding the roles and relationships of humanism and spirituality were also asked.

Focus Group Responses:

- Can you find meaning and purpose without calling it “spiritual”?
- Evolution of religious thinking continual - times change
- Less substantive message in UU sermons than 30-40 years ago
- Bring back UUA series on UU History (Bonnie Norton)
- Offer opportunities for people to learn
- Find a better balance in the service
- Develop a common understanding of “spirituality”
- What role does music play with regard to spirituality?
- Should our music have more variety?
- Regarding spirituality: “Often we are, but not a lot.”
- People are motivated to do social justice in other groups, not necessarily through UUCOV
- I look for sermons that tell me how to be and how to do, not sermons that tell me I am not doing enough
- Relationship of principles to humanism, not spirituality? Can there be a healthy mix?

Scenario No. 5: For several years UUCOV’s Social Justice efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UUs take very seriously, such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights and abortion rights.

Question: How should the congregation respond?

Analysis: There did not seem to be very many suggestions for specific social justice groups or issues promoted by the participants, but rather more discussion on how UUCOV could generally participate in social justice issues. There was some opinion that UUCOV should narrow the number of emphasized social justice concerns without losing sight of the many others. Immigration and refugee issues were mentioned as current concerns. The ideas of the participants seemed to stress that wider participation by congregants is needed.

Focus Group Responses:

- Political vs. Non-political
- Emphasize one or two programs without forgetting others
- How do we live out the Seven Principles?
- Need to engage the congregation
- Accountability for social justice
- Conduct study group centered on Pastor Bill’s book on diversity
- Welcoming congregation preparation was very effective
- Refugee and immigration issues need to be on our radar
- How much can we push ourselves outside of our comfort zones?
- Statement of conscience issue should be remembered
- Not a congregation-wide stance
- Project vs. position

Scenario No. 1: UUCOV is located on 5 acres in what is rapidly becoming a center of the Venice community. Periodically suggestions are made about how to make wise use of our site.

Question: How would you like to see our congregation make maximum use of its property

Analysis: Participants relayed concern about the status of the relationship of UUCOV with IVMS and having that settled prior to any long-range planning for use of campus land. There was clear opposition to “gifting” land to any outside groups. There was some support for building

a new, larger sanctuary to avoid having to hold two services at different times. Suggestions were made that a “campus management” plan, including inventory, condition status, need, etc. would be the first step towards long range planning. There did not seem to be one overarching idea about what to do with the campus but rather participants felt that there needs to be more assessment done before those types of decisions can be made.

Focus Group Responses:

- What deals, legal or handshake, do we have with IVMS?
- Open to Buddhists, but no giving/selling of land
- Are there other parties (besides Buddhists) who are interested in sharing land use?
- Bigger sanctuary
- Activity center
- Flexible space
- Common ideas for how to use space
- Should offer a list of items that need to be purchased or renovated & let individuals decide if they want to donate or contribute.

Overview and Assessment of Third Focus Group (8-30-2022)
Bev Morrison and Jackie Wides—facilitators
(Summary presented in order of topic discussion)

Scenario #3: Many people seem unaware of what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes when a visitor introduces themselves at a service, they declare they “never knew” such a church existed.

Question: How could UUCOV and UU become better known in the community?

Analysis: The group began with a lively discussion about ways participants had seen other organizations share information about themselves. Suggestions focused on expanding communications in a variety of ways outward to an external audience. The suggestions primarily stressed traditional publicity methods; participants had little input about sending messages through “new” media via technology.

Focus Group Responses:

- Wear your name tag outside church - people will ask about what it is
- Place an informational table outside the library (like Jehovah’s Witnesses & Dems)
- Publish articles in newspaper, by minister and/or about UU
- Tee shirts (for kids & adults), bumper stickers to advertise
- Provide literature for people visiting the building for other reasons
- Bring a friend to church! (Could be a sponsored Sunday)
- Everyone should be welcoming
- Remove the back rows of chairs so everyone has to move forward. (Church looks empty on streaming on Sunday mornings)
- Research how people find a church
- Is wearing a mask a put-off?
- Sponsor a “vacation camp” for children but sponsor also adult/family activities
- Beef up youth religious education
- Promote book group discussions to public
- Focus outward on issues, not inward
- Advertise at Venice Theater

Reverend Amy joined the focus group as discussion began on Scenario #6.

Scenario #6: In reference to spirituality, Michael Durall writes, “The prevailing culture in too many UU congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend. Parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed and entertained—but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose.” (*The Almost Church*, Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2006)

Questions: 1. Does this quote describe UU? 2. What part should or does spirituality play in the life of UUCOV?”

Analysis: “Spirituality” meant different things to individual focus group members. Accordingly, responses were wide-ranging, from feeling threatened by Buddhist meditation to being drawn to Buddhism due to lack of spirituality at UUCOV—and from defining spirituality as “community” to defining it as a yearning for ritual. None of the participants had participated in the six-week “Defining Your Personal Spirituality” course UUCOV started earlier this year.

Aside: Rev. Amy mentioned that she will be offering UUA’s “Building Your Own Theology” course.

Focus Group Responses:

- We are getting older, sometimes things fall short suddenly
- Many older people do participate
- UUs can be a “brainy,” intellectual group, but emotion is important also
- Some miss out on mysticism (how we approach life “events”)
- I would like to have something “touch my heart”
- I find Monk San threatening. Are UUs lacking something essential?
- When I first came, there was a great sense of community. That doesn’t exist now.
- I think I was drawn to Blue Lotus because of lack of spirituality otherwise
- Need more unity- what about the end of service song we used to sing where we held hands?
- Some rituals are needed - old ways that are familiar to all; this adds to community.
- How can we make constructive suggestions that are heard?

Scenario #2: In Venice, where the median age is 69.1, UUCOV’s most active members are even older: Board of Trustees: 86% (6/7) older than 69; Coordinating Council: 82% (9/11) older than 69. Teams and committees are comprised similarly. Those of us in our 70’s are closing in on our expiration date.

Question: How should UUCOV address this situation?

Analysis: Everyone seemed to tacitly agree about the need to grow membership; no one argued otherwise. Participants mentioned attracting seniors who are moving to Florida; there was little said about attracting families with children. Discussion focused primarily on ways to make UUCOV better known. The bottom line: Reach out to neighbors and existing organizations by sponsoring and hosting interesting programs.

Aside: Rev. Amy urged us to think of new ways become known/involved in the community. When logistics issues arose over a transportation issue, she said, “Maybe you need to buy a bus.”

Focus Group Responses:

- Change procedures for committee selection & officer selection. One person gets elected & appoints friends to fill positions.

- Bring in more seniors who are moving here. Reel them in, invite them into our homes.
- Connect with Venice Newcomers.
- More precisely define our BASE.
- Serve the needs of RE families
- Offer programs that appeal to the public and PUBLICIZE!
- Engage one-on-one with Laurel Civic Association
- Buy a bus! Could be used for a variety of purposes!
- Develop an insanely good adult religious program!
- One idea from the past: a grandparent program with Montessori School
- Partner with other churches to meet needs of children
- Provide free concerts at church, invite the public!
- Offer more social events at church
- Use alternate media

Scenario #4: Each year UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years, a small percentage of those who pledge have supported the bulk of the expenses. Consider this year: the top 10 pledges covered almost a third of the proposed budget, and the people behind these pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit.

Question: What strategies should UUCOV adopt to strengthen our outlook?

Analysis: Members had little understanding of church finances. They did not originate alternative ways to run the pledge drive. In fact, they turned to Rev. Amy to ask if there were different approaches to pledging. Participants' suggestions mostly covered fundraising via new/special projects, as well as building community and attracting more members. They suggested that the way new members are introduced to pledging may need revision.

Aside: When asked, Rev. Amy listed alternative approaches to conducting pledge drives.

Focus Group Responses:

- Develop a better sense of community. People donate where they feel accepted.
- Announce each week the amount that was collected via the basket the week before.
- Specific requests bring in more
- There are alternate ways to “do” pledges - try some other ways
- Follow the Jewish tradition of allowing people to “buy” naming rights for bits & pieces, such as bulletin boards, whatever.
- Specify the collection each week for some need of the church. e.g., a bag of mulch or \$5.
- More members will build a greater financial base.
- Be concerned about how ZOOM may negatively impact a sense of community

- BUILD a COMMUNITY!
- Need to know more about church finances.

Scenario #5: For several years, UUCOV's Social Justice efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UUs take very seriously, such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights and abortion rights.

Question: How should the congregation respond?

Analysis: Although the desire to support a variety of issues was expressed, this group was more interested in UUCOV's traditional Social Justice issues (homelessness and hunger) than current evolving issues. Participants mentioned being fearful of retaliation for espousing hot-button social issues, given the Florida political/social environment. They also expressed the need for congregation-wide discussion about Social Justice, involving everyone at UUCOV, not just members of the Social Justice committee.

Focus Group Responses:

- Promote a variety of issues.
- Use town meetings or forums to elicit discussion within the congregation
- Be more visible, e.g., on voting rights
- We need to conquer our fear of addressing issues that may be controversial
- Need congregation-wide discussion on social justice
- We need to focus on LGBTQ issues as many members connect with these
- Support teachers and the school system!
- Open a library of banned books available to the public!

Scenario #1: UUCOV is located on 5 acres in what is rapidly becoming a center of the Venice community. Periodically, suggestions are made about how to make wise use of our site.

Question: How would you like to see our congregation make maximum use of its property?

Analysis: Participants focused primarily on environmental issues and adding space for UUCOV functions. Questions arose about the status of the relationship between UUCOV and IVMS. There was little discussion about sharing space with the Blue Lotus temple.

Focus Group Responses:

- Would LOVE a labyrinth!
- Do nothing. Green Space is good.
- Consider climate change & plant trees.
- Build a Fellowship Hall for meetings, a meditation center, a more usable kitchen.
- Could combine a labyrinth, green space, more trees, and a meditation center (could partner).

- IF we BUILD, needs to be energy efficient!
- Build based on NEED!
- Community garden (could current pump house source the water?)
- Build tiny houses
- Build a larger sanctuary, present one becomes the fellowship hall.
- Sell Waters Hall & Asta Linder with the land. Use the profits to build a new building.
- What is our current agreement with IVMS?

####

Overview and Assessment of the Fourth Focus Group (9-21-2022)
Jackie Wides and Barb Gundy - facilitators
(Summary presented in order of discussion by focus group)

Participants:

	UU	UUCOV
Ruth Boysworth	6	6
Lynn Jordan	20	20
Marianne Lombard	21	21
Jerry Moja	40	5
Kim Roden	40	5
Kathleen Schwartz	40	7
Linda Taylor	16	16
Nancy Zarowin	9	9

Scenario No. 2: In Venice where the median age is 69.1, UUCOV’s most active members are even older: Board of Trustees: 86% (6/7) older than 69; Coordinating Council: 82% (9/11) older than 69. Teams & committees are comprised similarly. Those of us in our 70’s are closing in on our expiration date.

Question: How should UUCOV address this situation?

Analysis: The need to attract new members was an implied assumption in most of the responses. References to “younger” members generally referred to younger senior citizens (people in their 50s and 60s). The most frequently discussed suggestions related to: UUCOV-sponsored events to attract people to our campus, renting our space to outside organizations that bring people to the campus, and improving the physical facilities..

Focus Group Responses:

- Do outside activities attract new members (Buddhists, etc.) (all outside activities)
- Outside activities attract new members
- Need younger folks to avoid Shaker’s fate
- Activities before or after a service
- Bring a friend to church followed by a coffee hour
- Family Promise activities on campus
- End of Life information with elder lawyer and doctors
- Recruit activities like SILL
- Auction during season
- Interfaith activities on campus
- Professional musicians during services
- Tie activities to our church (publicity)
- Improve physical plant to be more appealing (we can’t have a pancake breakfast)
- Ask how big we want to be
- Communicate to new residents to join us

Scenario No. 6: In reference to spirituality, Michael Durall writes, “The prevailing culture in too many UU congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend. Parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed, and entertained — but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose.” (The Almost Church, Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2006)

Questions: 1. Does this quote describe UUCOV? 2. What part should or does spirituality play in the life of UUCOV?

Analysis: The focus group participants acknowledged the different definitions of spirituality within our congregation. (To some, spirituality involves a God; to others, it is simply a path to a fulfilled life.) They also noted differing attitudes towards increasing the spiritual dimensions of the Sunday service and classes/programs. A recurring theme on this and the other topics was that in order to “do more,” UUCOV must recruit a greater number of people to be active volunteers.

Focus Group Responses:

- Term “spirituality” is a problem with some people
- Important to some not to others
- Spirituality is a spectrum
- Programs on spirituality
- Poll congregation on their personal views on spirituality
- Announcements take away from spirituality in service
- Vary focus of service (non-spiritual, spiritual, joys/concerns, etc.)
- Need more volunteers
- Don’t want to be told what to do
- I come to service for sermon and the minister

Scenario No. 5: For several years UUCOV’s Social Justice efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UUs take very seriously, such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights and abortion rights.

Question: How should the congregation respond?

Analysis: There was little discussion on *which* social justice activities to address. Instead, the conversation revolved around the need to narrow UUCOV’s focus to a small number of social justice causes and rally the congregation towards these. Participants wanted more information about what charities do with money we donate. They also discussed fear of violent response if UUCOV champions unpopular social issues, and ways to avoid hostile encounters.

Focus Group Responses:

- We are a small congregation. What if we concentrated on one or two issues for a year?
- Concentrate energy and money
- Focus activities so we don’t spread ourselves too thin
- Many congregants don’t know the four or five charities that we currently support
- Pass the plate – do we generate funds? Put it outside of sanctuary, Is it a useful ritual?
- Representatives from charities tell us what they use the money for, or talk at a service (e.g., when Immokalee workers came)
- Florida hostile environment should not make us hesitate to address issues
- Live our spirituality without being confrontational
- Respond to Ron D. by actively participating in social activities as individuals
- Don’t participate in cage fights

Scenario No. 1: UUCOV is located on 5 acres in what is rapidly becoming a center of the Venice community. Periodically suggestions are made about how to make wise use of our site.

Question: How would you like to see our congregation make maximum use of its property

Analysis: There was little discussion about the specific outside groups who currently use our campus. Instead, there were suggestions about how to use the campus to expand the number of outside groups/organizations/activities that take place here. Also, people talked about improving our facilities to make UUCOV a more comfortable, modern place to meet.

Focus Group Responses:

- Weddings on campus
- Community gardens
- Raze two house and build new all-purpose building
- Driveway/parking issues
- Café/kitchen facilities (small near gardens)
- Comfortable place to sit and gather
- One combined building for coffee and socializing
- Nice physical space to attract new people
- Make campus available to outside groups who share our values
- Housing
- Sing what we have, we just don't have much

Scenario No. 4: Each year UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years a small percentage of those who pledge have supported the bulk of the expenses. Consider this year, the top 10 pledges covered almost a third of the proposed budget, and the people behind these pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit.

Question: What strategies should UUCOV adopt to address a weakened financial outlook?

Analysis: The members of this focus group were generally uninformed about church finances and confused about whether most of the pledge money coming from so few people was a distress signal or not. The suggestions focused on getting more people to live up to their pledges or to give more.

Focus Group Responses:

- What assets can we monetize?
- Same dynamic in other churches, you don't get around it
- Many pledges are not paid at all
- Look at our fiscal system (one pledge check has not been cashed)
- Call people
- Talk more from pulpit
- Email or text people who are behind, some folks forget
- How do members communicate?
- Do we need to sell land?
- Communicate average pledge and ask for more.
- Communicate the budget and our shortfall
- Communicate what we can afford
- Go into the numbers. What does budget allow?
- What would our ideas (e.g., new building) cost?
- Sell Waters Hall

Scenario No. 3: Many people seem unaware of what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes when a visitor introduces themselves at a service they declare they “never knew” such a church existed. **Question:** How could UUCOV and UU become better known in the community

Analysis: Comments focused on traditional ways to communicate better to a general audience. There was little to no discussion on “new media” approaches to increasing UUCOV’s profile in the community.

Focus Group Responses:

- Attend General Assembly
- Gondolier articles and religious column
- When groups use the facilities, explain who we are at their event
- Offer information to new people
- Work through wedding planners to publicize as wedding venue
- Community events outreach
- We need to not be the “hidden gem” in the community
- Electronic sign with church and event information
- Newspaper recognition, especially pictures, for social contributions

Overview and Assessment of the Fifth Focus Group
Bill Reynolds and Richard Cannarelli
October 20, 2022

Participants:

Brad Hardin
Don Courtsal
Marylyn Amick
Bonnie Hurley
Dave Williams
Martha Williams.
Barbara Buehring

Scenario No. 1: UUCOV is located on 5 acres in what is rapidly becoming a center of the Venice community. Periodically suggestions are made about how to make wise use of our site. Question: How would you like to see our congregation make maximum use of its property

Summary:

There was no general consensus about what to do with the UUCOV space but one item stands out – the participant wanted to maintain the integrity of our property. There was no support for giving the Blue Lotus space to build a center but there was support for accommodating them and allowing them to use our facilities.

The notion of using the space for environmental or sustainable activities was discussed. There appeared to be some support for using the grounds for a farmers market type of activity.

There was clear support for a fellowship hall

Several comments were made about the age and appearance of our grounds and facilities. One member recalled a story told by another member. Their HOA needed a space to hold a meeting and someone suggested that they might be able to meet at UUCOV. This suggestion was rejected because “the place is very dirty.”

List of Suggestions/Comments:

Create a green sanctuary space for ecological consistency and sustainability
Community Garden
Fellowship Hall
Create space to accommodate other faiths like the Blue Lotus Buddhists
Build a bigger sanctuary to accommodate growth

Scenario No. 2 In Venice, where the median age is 69, UUCOV’s most active members are even older:
Board of Trustees: 86% (6/7) older than 69; Coordinating Council: 82% (9/11) older than 69. Teams &

committees are comprised similarly. Those of us in our 70's are closing in on our expiration date.
Question: How should UUCOV address this situation?

Summary:

The participants generally recognized that this was a congregation comprised of primarily senior citizens and indicated that that age group was the most likely to be attracted to UUCOV. There was not a strong sentiment toward reaching out and attracting young families. The conversation mostly centered around how we can make ourselves known to newcomers and other retirees.

Suggestions/Comments:

Sponsor activities like a farmers' market that would draw people to the property.

Can UUA be a resource by providing suggestions

Have "cluster" meetings with other UU congregations

Search out newly retired individuals and reach out to them about UUCOV

Set up an information table outside the Venice library

Contact the newcomers club to find out the names of people who have recently come to Venice and reach out to them.

Retirement community meetings and seminars.

Scenario No. 3: Many people seem unaware of what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes when a visitor introduces themselves at a service, they declare they "never knew" such a church existed.

Question: How could UUCOV and UU become better known in the community?

Summary: Most of the comments made centered around conducting activities that attracted people and the importance of advertising our activities to the community.

Comments/Suggestions:

Conduct activities that draw people to the campus like a Saturday farmer's market, a music festival or a display of art.

Hold a Plato's Café at different locations

Get publicity for our activities in the newspapers

Participate in community events like the Pride Festival

Scenario No. 4:

Each year UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years a small percentage of those who pledge have supported the bulk of the expenses. Consider this year, the top 10 pledges covered almost a third of the proposed budget, and the people behind these pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit. Question: What strategies should UUCOV adopt to address a weakened financial outlook?

Summary: Several of the participants indicated that they did not know this about the UUCOV finances. There was a lot of discussion about pledging and the participants seemed to support more emphasis being placed on contributing when new members enroll.

Comments/Suggestions:

More fundraising activities

Emphasize pledging at the point of enrollment in the congregation

Not much knowledge about UUCOV's finances

Many questions about Legacy Friends and the fact that there has never been an attempt to identify how much would be given to UUCOV

Discussed the possibility of re-initiating home visits to secure pledges

It was pointed out that UUCOV used to have 3 committees that dealt with finances: 1. The Finance Committee 2. Pledge Committee, 3. Stewardship Committee.

Scenario No. 5: For several years UUCOV's Social Justice efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UUs take very seriously, such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights and abortion rights. Question: How should the congregation respond?

Summary:

Perhaps the most interesting comment came from one member who stated that our congregation was not committed to social justice. This member also stated that we are willing to help with a project or program but we are not willing to engage in anything that appears to be political. The member also quoted our former minister as sharing this view. This stimulated a lot of discussion.

Comments:

Reconcile social justice perception of UUCOV

Engage in a joint effort with other UU congregations

Members of our congregation are ready to "help" instead of doing something perceived to be "political."

Need to clarify the objectives of social justice

Scenario No. 6: In reference to spirituality, Michael Durall writes, "The prevailing culture in too many UU congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend. Parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed, and entertained — but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose." (The Almost Church, Jenkin Lloyd Jones Press, 2006) Two part Question: 1. Does this quote describe UUCOV? 2. What part should or does spirituality play in the life of UUCOV?

Comments:

Information about spiritual groups and activities must be made in different modalities

There needs to be clarification of what spirituality means to a UU.

Several different "definitions of spirituality were offered including beauty in flowers, poetry, music.

Sermons should reflect personal stories of spirituality

Eliminate the applause after Lise's piano playing

Enhance things that support a communal feeling. One member indicated a dislike of the former practice of holding hands at the end of the service while singing "Let Love Surround You."

General Impression:

Perhaps the strongest ideas to emerge from this session are the following:

- The buildings of UUCOV are aging and do not give a good impression to the public. Specific mention was made of Waters Hall, Asta Linder house and the UUCOV grounds.
- Support for a fellowship hall but no support for donating land to the Blue Lotus Buddhists
- Conflicting impressions of social justice and UUCOV's embrace of social justice issues
- Conflicting ideas about UUCOV's addressing spiritual needs
- Surprising lack of knowledge about UUCOV's finances
- Several comments were made about the lack of activities at UUCOV as compared to past years. There was agreement that COVID had much to do with this but one member made the comment that the locus of her community is her retirement home and not UUCOV.

Respectfully submitted by:

Bill Reynolds and Rich Cannarelli

Overview and Summary of the Sixth Strategic Planning Focus Group Conducted on 11/15/2022

Final Draft

Barb Gundy, Jackie Wides and Bill Reynolds as Facilitators

Participants

Beverley Morrison
Joel Morrison
Henry Bright
Barbara Griffin
Richard Smith
Pamela Palmer
Dave Lyon
Dale Povenmire
Rich Cannerelli

Overall Summary

This Focus Group was very unique. It consisted of nine participants that were all Past Presidents of the Congregation. We had the very first President of the Congregation, Henry Bright through our immediate Past President, Pam Palmer in attendance! This is a group that knows intimately the history of the Congregation, knows its challenges and knows its potential. It is also hard to find any other group of members in the Congregation who is as committed and as generous with their time and talent as these folks. One of the strongest contributions they made to this Focus Group was their perspective of how the Congregation responded in the past to the scenarios presented. While we sometimes got focused on the past instead of the future, the background and experiences they shared were invaluable in informing us of what to be aware of as we move forward, what challenges we might face in making changes and the need for any change initiatives to take into account the spiritual, financial and social needs of older and younger members simultaneously. We owe them a debt of gratitude for their service to the Congregation as well as their contribution to the work of this Committee.

Scenario #1

UUCOV is located on five acres in what is rapidly becoming a center of the Venice Community. Periodically, suggestions are made on how to make wise use of our site.

Question:

How would you like to see our Congregation make maximum use of our site?

Analysis:

There was a wide range of responses on this topic, but the bulk of the conversation revolved around the expansion and / or utilization of our buildings. An overriding sentiment is the need to conduct a careful evaluation of the matter and to develop a vision and a strategy to achieve it.

Focus Group Responses:

1. Resolve IVMS easement issues as it will have a significant impact on how we utilize our property as well as on the future value of it.
2. Need a long range plan for a stand alone or attached Fellowship Hall or Outdoor Pavilion.
3. Preserve our land and make it more aesthetically pleasing.
4. Ambivalent about the need for a new building...need to evaluate based on how future Congregations will interact with the campus.
5. Major issue is parking and campus traffic due to IVMS easement that impedes the use of our own property.
6. Explore a creative use of the vacant land for a multi purpose use such as a campus for several different faith based organizations.

7. Evaluate if Water's Hall and Asta Linder House still or will continue to meet our needs.

Scenario #2

In Venice, where the median age is 69.1, UUCOV's most active members are even older: current BOT: 86% (6 of 7) older than 69; Coordinating Council: 82% (9 of 11) older than 69. Teams and committees are comprised similarly. Those of us in our 70's are closing in on our expiration date.

Question:

How should UUCOV address this situation?

Analysis:

With some dissent, the overall consensus of the Group was that we should focus on building our membership with newly retired folks relocating to the area. A good amount of our discussion revolved around how we brand ourselves and how we publicize and market ourselves (branding).

Focus Group Responses

1. Focus on new retirees to Florida. Young families are not our future demographic.
2. Celebrate who we are!
3. Look for a younger minister for the Congregation to attract younger Congregants.
4. Can a minister be effective with both a younger and an older population?
5. A Congregation takes on the "look" of the surrounding community.
6. Reassess the children's Religious Education Program.
7. Need a great marketing pamphlet on UUCOV.
8. Articles by the minister in the Gondolier are very effective.
9. Speak in the vernacular of the surrounding community, not "UU ease".
10. Advertise "Come Join Us". Go to where potential members are.

11. Hold more services outdoors on the beach and in parks.
12. Our “Brand” is our Seven Principles, our social justice actions, our non-dogmatic theology, lay led church and a place to explore new ideas.
13. Define who we are in a few words (elevator speech)
14. If we don’t know who we are, how can we explain it to others.
15. Improve communication with UUA.

Scenario #3

Many people seem unaware of what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes, when visitors introduce themselves at service, they declare they “never knew that such a church existed!”

Question: How can UUCOV and UU become better known in the community?

Analysis:

This group offered deep and thoughtful responses to this question. This is a group of long time UUCVers who are very aware of the lack of strong brand identity of our denomination and our church in the community. The discussion ranged from what our brand identity should be to how we communicate it effectively. While there were diverse opinions, there was common agreement that there is an opportunity to do better in this area and that it is necessary in order for the Congregation to grow.

Focus Group Responses:

1. We need to develop an attractive, concise pamphlet about UU.
2. We should have regular feature articles in “The Gondolier”.
3. We need to speak in the vernacular of the community and avoid using buzz words and “UU-ease”.
4. Need to advertise a message of “Come Join Us” and go to where the people are.
5. Conduct more open air services in public areas such as the beach, parks, etc.
6. Our “Brand” consists of our seven principles, being humanist, advocating for social justice, being non-dogmatic, providing a place to

- explore new and different theologies and to find one's own personal truth, and being a "Lay led" church with Congregational polity.
7. Define who we are simply, accurately and concisely using as few words as possible.
 8. Keep our Seven Principles!
 9. If we don't know who we are we cannot communicate effectively with outsiders.
 10. Improve our communication with UUA and use their resources more extensively and effectively.

Scenario #4

Each year, UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years, a small percentage of those who pledge have supported the bulk of the expenses. Consider this year: the top 10 pledges covered almost a third of the proposed budget, and the people behind these pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our Congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit.

Question:

What strategies should UUCOV adopt to address a weakened financial outlook.

Analysis:

There was a very mixed discussion on this topic. One group believed that we need to develop a strategy to address this possible vulnerability while another group felt that there will always be members with deep pockets who will fill any void.

Focus Group Responses:

1. People with deep pockets and willing to contribute will always emerge. This is how most churches operate.

2. Current Congregation lacks knowledge of the church finances.
3. If we added up the dollars drawn down from the reserves to cover the gap in operating costs in recent years, we would have enough to pay for a new Fellowship Hall.
4. Bring back a robust Pledge Campaign including a pledge event / dinner to get folks excited about giving!
5. Better communication needed with Congregants on financial matters.
6. Covid hurt our fundraising efforts.
7. Rejuvenate the stewardship program.

Scenario #5

For several years, UUCOV's Social Justice efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UU's take very seriously such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights and abortion rights.

Question:

How should the Congregation respond?

Analysis:

The sense of the Group is that we have opportunities to improve in this area. Some referred back to a time when we collaborated with a large number of UU communities from Sarasota to as far south as Naples. The group felt that collaborating and communicating with other local UU Congregations in Sarasota and Port Charlotte would be beneficial.

Focus Group Responses

1. Should go to “SHOUT”
2. Rejuvenate the LGBTQ Committee.
3. Consider Social Justice focus as individual, congregational focused or in General (wider world)
4. Revitalize what we are doing. For instance, examine our role in VICA.
5. Personally ask people to get involved in social action activities.
6. Advertise what we are doing.
7. Create a UU Cluster for social action with other UU congregations and with outside organizations.
8. Create an online link to VICA and other organizations.

Scenario #6

In reference to spirituality, Michael Durall writes, “The prevailing culture in too many UU congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend. Parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed and entertained — but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose.” (“The Almost Church”, Jenkin Lloyd Press, 2006).

Questions:

1. Does this quote describe UUCOV?
2. What part should or does spirituality play in the life of UUCOV?

Analysis

Clearly, there are mixed feelings on how well UUCOV meets the needs of those seeking spiritual nourishment including if we should make any effort at all. Perhaps the topic of spirituality has many facets and the topic is interpreted through each person’s own lens of what that means. This is, it seems, to be a topic well worth defining better and developing appropriate measures to respond to the spiritual needs of those that are so inclined

Focus Group Responses

1. Refer to our 7 Principles. They provide spirituality.
2. Our Congregants have already led purposeful lives.
3. We already do a great job (music, sermons, fellowship).
4. According to people who have taken the “Spiritual Practices Course”, we can do a better job at spirituality in the Congregation.
5. Chalice Circles and Spiritual Fellowship Groups are cited as important places for folks to gain spiritual nourishment.
6. Time limited, single topic, discussion groups on spirituality are somewhat scarce.
7. Return to holding “Forums” after service on Sundays.

Summary of the Seventh Strategic Planning Focus Group Conducted on 11/29/2022

Participants

	# years a UUCOV Member	# years a UU total before UUCOV
Rosalie Danbury	21	38
Bill Dowling	12	0
Kindra Muntz	21	78
Richard Palmer	13	60
Donna Shaffer	7	55

Moderators

Jackie Wides
Bill Reynolds

Summary

This group consisted of long time members who have had a particular influence on different aspects and areas of the Congregation. They shared a deep level of institutional knowledge, had well seasoned perspectives, had a deep commitment to the Congregation and offered well informed ideas and responses to Congregational challenges. While groups comprised of this demographic naturally tend to reflect on the past, they easily were able to transition their viewpoint to the long term future of UUCOV.

Scenario #1

UUCOV is located on five acres in what is rapidly becoming a center of the Venice Community. Periodically, suggestions are made on how to make wise use of our site.

Question:

How would you like to see our Congregation make maximum use of our site?

Analysis:

As with most Focus Groups, this topic raised a wide range of ideas. The one common thread seemed to be that everyone realized the untapped potential in this, our most valuable tangible asset.

Focus Group Responses to Scenario #1

1. Build a multi-faith community comprised of liberal faith denominations who can share the campus with us.
2. Perpetuate the “peacefulness” of the campus.
3. Sell the campus and relocate the church to a new location and rebuild to our specific needs.
4. Address access issues (driveway easement, parking, etc.) which greatly limits our full enjoyment of the campus.
5. Follow what one participant referred to as “the Ft. Myers Model” which was a long term plan to build out the campus to address needs as they arose.

Scenario #2

In Venice, where the median age is 69.1 years, UUCOV’s active members are even older: current Board 86% (6 of 7) older than 69, Coordinating Council: 82% (9 of 11) older than 69. Teams and Committees are similarly comprised. Those of us in our 70’s are closing in on our expiration dates.

Question: How should UUCOV address this situation?

Analysis:

While there was an acceptance of the vulnerability of membership sustainability in the face of daunting demographics, there was little consensus as to how to remedy the matter. Responses ranged from focusing on an older population to developing a wide ranging age demographic and from appealing to a cross section of the socio-economic scale to focussing on the higher end of the spectrum.

Focus Group Responses to Scenario 2:

1. Determine who our “target market” really is.
2. Diversify the music during service so that traditional music is mixed with more contemporary pieces.
3. Create a focus on the 50+ age demographic.
4. Venice has changed due to population growth (implication of broader opportunities to recruit?).
5. Offer a religious value proposition alternative to just practicing “nothing”.
6. Create non-UUCOV events that are intergenerational such as community dances.
7. Create a Liberal Religious Youth Group.
8. Appeal to higher socio-economic demographic.
9. Combine interests and appeal to a wide spectrum of the population.
10. Signage is a great “message vehicle”.

Scenario #3

Many People seem unaware of what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes, when a visitor introduces themselves at a service, they declare the “never knew” such a church existed.

Question: How could UUCOV and UU become better known in the community?

Analysis:

It was clear that the group recognized this as a clear vulnerability for UUCOV. There was a fair amount of discussion of previous methods of approaching this situation but some novel ideas also emerged. It seems clear that establishing a brand and an effective strategy needs to emerge and needs to include a multi modal approach.

Focus Group Responses to Scenario #3

1. Utilize the “wayside pulpit” sign to attract new members.
2. Do billboard advertising.
3. Use print ads in local papers and magazines.
4. Become much more active in the community.
5. Develop a line of UUCOV merchandise (decals, tee shirts, hats, etc.) to help build name identity.
6. Clearly define our brand and create a good elevator speech.
7. Be Visible / Be Proud!
8. Weekly Minister’s column in the Gondolier.
9. Have a consistent message on social media platforms
10. Develop great catch phrases.

Scenario #4

Each year, UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years, a small percentage of those who pledge have supported the bulk of expenses. Consider this year: the top ten pledges covered almost a third of the budget and the people behind these pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our Congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit.

Question:

What strategies should UUCOV adopt to address a weakened financial outlook?

Analysis

In general, the Group did not fully appreciate the challenge presented by this vulnerability and focused more on traditional pledge drive activities. As was expressed by one member of the Group, “there is a need to raise the financial awareness of the Congregation”.

Focus Group Responses to Scenario 4:

1. Recruit as members folks from higher socio-economic groups.
2. Suggest specific levels of support to reach folks at all levels of wealth.
3. Revitalize the Legacy Giving Group.
4. Raise the financial awareness of the Congregation and make it easy to talk about money.
5. Provide guidelines on how much to give.
6. Graphically display pledge drive results in the Lanai (thermometer).
7. Be very transparent on finances with the Congregation.
8. Conduct pledge drives carefully and slowly and with great planning.

Scenario #5

For several years, UUCOV’s Social Justice Efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida’s political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UU’s take very seriously such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights, and abortion rights.

Question:

How should UUCOV respond?

Analysis:

This was a very productive and insightful discussion with a good number of creative ideas on how we might improve our Social Justice involvement. In the past, UUCOV has given generously to a number of social justice related causes and we do have a history of active participation in a

number of areas. In recent years, however, while financial support of these causes remains strong, personal involvement has somewhat waned. This might be due to a combination of the Pandemic as well as to an aging Congregational demographic who cannot participate as actively as they once did.

Focus Group Responses to Scenario #5

1. Find “Champions” for various causes and support them with resources.
2. Organize our Social Justice activities and create focus on several key areas of concern.
3. Attend the UU General Assembly where we can get a wealth of information about what other Congregations are doing.
4. Identify folks who are passionate about social justice issues and connect them with UUA resources.
5. Create a possible “mini-cluster” with neighboring UU Congregations to find joint social justice opportunities to work on together.
6. Discuss Social Justice as part of Pathways class with new members.

Scenario #6

In reference to spirituality, Michael writes, “ The prevailing culture in too many UU Congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend where parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed, and entertained, but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose.” (“The Almost Church”, Jenkin Lloyd Press, 2006)

Questions:

1. Does this describe UUCOV?
2. What part should spirituality play in the life of UUCOV?

Analysis:

This topic evoked a wide range of responses. There was concern that one would have to be careful about how spirituality is discussed in a UU congregation to some clear ideas about how spirituality, while different for each person, is a key element of our “worship” experience.

Focus Group Responses to Scenario #6

1. Create an environment where people can identify and develop their own spirituality.
2. Separate the concept of “faith’ from “spirituality”.
3. Stress the meaning and purpose of spirituality.
4. Listen to our children.
5. Inspire people to get involved.
6. Social action is an outcome of increased “spirituality”.
7. Challenge thinking on social issues.
8. Adapt to multiple nuances of spirituality.
9. Be careful about statements concerning spirituality

Summary of the Eighth Strategic Planning Focus Group Conducted on 12/02/2022

Barb Gundy and Bill Reynolds as Facilitators

Facilitators: Barb Gundy and Bill Reynolds

Participants

	Years at UUCOV	Total yrs. UU prior to UUCOV
Jack Head, President	9	65
Steve Leapley, Vice President	10	10
Ken Boysworth, Treasurer	8	3
Moe Morrison, Secretary	3	2
Serena Canerrelli, Trustee	16	0
Pat Wellington, Trustee	20	6

Overall Summary

This was a group consisting of the current Board of Trustees. This Group has an intimate knowledge of the history of the Congregation as well as the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. While there was consensus on many topics, there were wide ranging opinions in others such as the role of Social Justice in the Congregation, the utilization of the campus, and the importance of spiritual nourishment in our ministry. There was (as in other Focus Groups with long term members) a tendency to dwell on the past instead of looking at the horizon before us. Nevertheless, there were some very enlightening thoughts and proposals made that need to be considered.

Scenario #1

UUCOV is located on five acres in what is rapidly becoming one of the centers of the Venice Community. Periodically, suggestions are made as to how to make wise use of our campus.

Question: How would you like to see our Congregation make maximum use of our site?

Analysis:

This was a topic that this group had obviously been contemplating for some time. There seemed to be wide consensus for the future need of an additional building to house a Fellowship Hall along with other space uses for administrative purposes, classrooms, etc. There were differences of opinion, however, concerning what kind of building that should be, when it should be built and where it should be built. There was agreement, overall, that we should let growth in membership drive the need for new building. There were also some diverse opinions ranging from selling the property and building at a new location to building a religious faith campus consisting of different denominations.

Focus Group Responses

1. Monetize the property.
2. Expand the existing buildings.
3. Have an architectural assessment done of the campus and make recommendations as to how we should expand.
4. Sell property and start out fresh at a new location.
5. Build a religious campus that includes several faith communities that are compatible with ours.
6. Make sanctuary more visible from the road.
7. Improve the signage to make our curb appeal more inviting.
8. Change building facades / appearance.
9. Make significant improvements to landscaping and hardscaping.
10. Develop a written strategy for facilities updates.
11. Develop the area between IVMS and sanctuary.
12. Build a pole barn / pavilion on the side of the sanctuary.
13. Make sure that expansion is driven by growth in the Congregation.

Scenario #2

In Venice, where the median age is 69.1, UUCOV's most active members are even older. Current BOT : 86% (6 of 7) older than 69, Coordinating Council: 82% (9 of 11) older than 69. Teams and committees are comprised similarly. Those of us in our 70's are closing in on our expiration date.

Question:

How should UUCOV address this situation?

Analysis

There was a General consensus that our "target market" for recruiting new members was newly retired folks coming to Venice. At least two members advocated for attracting young families as they believed that the demographics in Venice are shifting to a younger a population. Accordingly, there were some wide ranging responses. It is clear that we need to clearly define the demographics we are facing using solid statistical data and trend analysis.

Focus Group Responses

1. Population mix in Venice is changing to a younger demographic.
2. Focus on newly retired folks in their mid-60's moving to Venice.
3. Contact organizations like the Newcomers Club of Venice and invite them to our Congregation for presentations, socials, etc.
4. Need to clarify clearly who we are trying to recruit.
5. Develop a Pre-K program using Asta Linder as a location in order to attract young couples to our campus.
6. Revitalize our relationship with IVMS with a goal of attracting young families to our campus for child related functions.
7. Be more visible in the community in ways that we draw younger folks to our campus.

8. Search for a new minister who can be effective with a wide range of age groups.

Scenario #3

Many people seem unaware what Unitarian Universalism is. Sometimes, when visitors introduce themselves at service, they declare they “never knew” that such a church existed.

Question: How can UUCOV and UU become better known in the community?

Analysis

This topic and question generated lots of great discussion and a number of excellent ideas. There was a consensus that this is an important issue and a challenging one at that! Bottomline is that we need to be clear about who we are targeting with our outreach and communications and that we need to be creative and use various modalities including print, social media platforms, branding, etc.

Focus Group Responses

1. Have minister columns on a regular basis in the Gondolier.
2. Continue to improve website design with an emphasis on simplicity, making it easy to read and navigate and making prominent our various programs.
3. Define our target market.
4. Develop a solid understanding of what our brand is, simplify it and broadcast wherever possible. Key elements of the Brand might include: inclusion, love, charity, inspirational sermons, welcoming community.
5. Establish emotional connections with newcomers.
6. Use “relationship selling” techniques.
7. “Deeds not Creeds”
8. Making a difference on earth, while alive.
9. Need to differentiate ourselves from other faiths.
10. Change the name of our Congregation to make it more reflective of who we are.

11. Change our logo.
12. Invite outside organizations in to make presentations, give talks, etc.

Scenario #4

Each year, UUCOV conducts a pledge drive to raise operational funds. For several years, a small percentage of this who pledge have supported the bulk of the expenses. Consider this year: the top 10 pledges covered almost a third of the operating budget, and the people behind those pledges are, on average, 83 years old. When they leave our Congregation due to death or illness, our finances will take a major hit.

Question:

What strategies should UUCOV adopt to address a potential weakened financial outlook?

Analysis

The consensus of the Group is that we need to broaden the scope of our fundraising and transition into a true financial stewardship model. Such a model would include the concept of fundraising on a 12 month basis making it more of a process than an event. There is also the strong sentiment that we need to be more transparent with the Congregation on our finances and do so in a simplified manner that communicates the state of finances in easy to understand terms.

Focus Group Responses

1. Educate Congregation on Finances and be fully transparent.
2. Request unrestricted bequests.
3. Ask that restricted Bequests be made to the Futures Fund or the Reserves Fund.
4. Create dedicated reserve line categories on our balance sheet.
5. Develop fund raising events that are creative, fun and draw the community in.
6. Discuss the concept of “Stewardship” with new members and include it as a topic in our Pathways classes.
7. Overhaul our entire income gratin strategy.

8. Evaluate how we spend money.
9. Ask committees and teams to partially fund their own expenses by having fundraising events of their own.
10. Expand our opportunities for “micro” donations by having “tip” jars at the coffee service to cover costs.
11. Monetize property.
12. Set up Stewardship as a Standing Committee with a Chair and a team. Concern would be a lack of available Congregants to lead and/or populate such a team.

Scenario #5

For several years, UUCOV’s Social Justice efforts have focused on supporting the homeless and the hungry. Recently, however, Florida political and social environments have become increasingly hostile to some of the issues that UU’s take very seriously such as LGBTQ concerns, voting rights and abortion rights.

Question:

How should the Congregation respond?

Analysis:

There was a wide range of opinions ranging from a more latent form of engagement on Social Justice issues to a very active role. There was some common agreement that it would be beneficial to form alliances (pods?) with our sister Congregations in Sarasota and Port Charlotte who have very active Social Justice teams.

Focus Group Responses

1. UUCOV cannot place enough interest on Social Justice issues.
2. Support Social Justice issues financially as a Congregation but not necessarily acting individually.
3. Keep the Social Action Team
4. Address whether Social Justice activities are meaningful to the ministry of UUCOV.
5. Define Social Justice as a core value of the Congregation rather than by the number of activities we engage in.

6. Should the “Community Forum Committee” become part of the Social Justice Team?
7. Collaborate with other nearby Congregations.
8. Due to average age of Congregants, and available resources, just keep doing what we are doing.
9. Adopt a family.
10. Become more visible on Social Justice issues.

Scenario #6

In reference to spirituality, Michael Duvall writes, “The prevailing culture in too many UU Congregations is that churches offer programs that people attend and parishioners are educated, informed, enlightened, fed and entertained – but not challenged to lead lives of meaning and purpose.” (“The Almost Church”, Jenkin Lloyd Press, 2006)

Question:

1. Does this quote describe UUCOV?
2. What part should spirituality play in the life of UUCOV if at all?

Analysis:

The consensus of the Group was that the quote does not accurately describe UUCOV and that the concept of spiritual nourishment is important to the life of this Congregation.

Focus Group Responses

1. Inspirational sermons are instrumental to creating spiritual nourishment.
2. Spiritual nourishment is very important.
3. Continue spiritual Fellowship Groups.
4. Maintain Blue Lotus connection.
5. Need to better define what spirituality really means.
6. Spirituality is the “action of your faith” It is “how you lead your life”.

Zarwin Fellowship group “focus group”

Hi Bill,

Many of the members of our fellowship have not had a chance to be in a focus group. With the Interim period underway and the nomination of a Search committee imminent, we had our own discussion around some of the key questions that our congregation should be asking and answering. The discussion was so good (if I may say so...) that I wanted to gather our thoughts and send them to you as a board member and Long Range planning leader. Thank you for listening.

- 1) The identity and mission of UUCOV. The membership of UUCOV is older. We believe that the church can do great service by embracing that fact and expanding our focus on services, care, and education for our largely retired population. This also fits the surrounding community. (Not to make us a pseudo-AARP, spiritual care being foremost, but practical care also)
 - Offer more support to Eileen Leapley and the Caring Team. More focus on reaching out to those who have become isolated.
 - Offer programs for elders combining practical with moral and ethical considerations that would aid our members and attract and serve new people: end of life planning, grief support, financial planning, elder law, fraud prevention; tech for the non-tech; health programs; spirituality for exes (ex-other denominations) etc.
 - Don't put a lot of effort into trying to attract young families. Redirect our RE program to serve who we are rather than who we used to be or think we should be.
 - See if there is an interest in the Surrogate Grandparents group (kind of like Big Brothers/ Big Sisters) 9k members on Facebook
- 2) Social Justice
Put more focus on one or two groups so that we can really learn more about them and get more involved. Do more than just collect \$\$\$. Find volunteer opportunities. Get more information about what our donation goes towards. Family Promise would be a great start.
- 3) Welcoming
One of our strengths is that many newcomers have found us very welcoming. More leadership on how even more members can be involved in engaging with visitors. Make better use of when we open our space for events that attendees can easily find out who we are (not proselytizing but making sure welcoming info is prominently displayed)
- 4) Spirituality
We come to church not just for social life but to learn how to be better people. We are comfortable calling this spirituality. We could benefit from bridging the terminology divide between athiests, agnostics, theists, spirituality –ists etc. Acknowledge that some have been traumatized or alienated by their religious upbringing but learn to detoxify certain words some don't like.
- 5) Organizational

More training on how to function on boards and committees. Revive relationships with other SW Florida UU churches, both individually and as a group. Have joint get-togethers for workshops and or fun.

6) Growth?

Most of our new members are retired UU-ers from north. There's nothing wrong with that. Keep working to refine and improve our identity and mission and we can attract more locals as well. We need to keep learning and growing to remain vital but not necessarily to become a lot larger. Growth, or maintaining our size while increasing participation – these will come organically if we do the work. It comes from the congregation, not the minister. The minister works for us.