

Report of UU's 5th Principle Structured Dialogue Sponsored by the UUAA Humanist Study Group on February 13, 2022

Introduction

At the UUAA Congregational meeting on January 23, 2022, congregants were encouraged to take a more active role in asserting leadership in key areas of UUAA life. The Structured Dialogue on the 5th Principle sponsored by the Humanist Study Group is an example of our willingness to do exactly that by offering dialogues, forums, and discussion groups providing avenues for an examination of the intersection of our values and our UU Principles. This was considered to be a very important step in rebuilding the congregational community as it emerged from two years of pandemic lockdown.

To begin the process the Humanist Study Group formed a sub-committee whose task it was to explore ways to take the temperature of the congregation as a whole regarding the relevance of concerns often voiced within the study group and the questions they raised. The sub-committee soon hit upon the benefits of the Structured Dialogue process as a way to elicit information and perspectives from a broad section of the community that would then be shared with spiritual and lay leaders, and the congregation. A subsequent decision was made to concentrate first on the 5th Principle: *"The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregation(s) and in society at large"*. This report is the first step in the sharing process.

The stated goals of the Structured Dialogue process were to provide an opportunity for members of UUAA to share their thoughts and to listen to others' ideas about how we incorporate the values stated in the 5th Principle into our lives. We asked the question: "Why are we here?", and answered: "We are here to listen to one another, to share our ideas, concerns and suggestions about how we can preserve and strengthen our democratic ideals within our religious community." Particular attention was paid to the work of Roy Wood Sellars, a member of our congregation and the drafter of the first Humanist Manifesto, with a focus on this quote:

"In the church there should be opportunities for open discussion, and a church should be willing to discuss anything freely, and to look on all sides of every question."

This report contains a description of the Structured Dialogue process and the results of the event that took place on February 13, 2022. It also presents a discussion of the results and their implications and recommendations for both the future direction of the Humanist Study group and the UUAA community as a whole.

Process

Individuals were invited to participate in the zoom event via a personalized email message that was sent to a variety of UUAA list/serve groups. This message briefly explained what a Structured Dialogue was and what participants could expect. They were instructed to RSVP to Hal Breidenbach, who kept a running total and advised the sub-committee on how many groups needed to be accommodated. Registration was ended a few days before the meeting so as to better manage the process. Two days prior to the 13th, a reminder was sent along with these questions:

Question 1: *As you consider the right of conscience and democratic practices at UUAA, what are your thoughts about it?*

Question 2: *Thinking about the future at UUAA, what would you like the right of conscience and democratic practices to be in place?*

Question 3: *What concrete actions could we start doing now to achieve the practices we want in the future?*

The Structured Dialogue meeting began with a greeting from Terry Madden and an orientation from Tim Richards. Tim reminded us that the UUA and UUAA are democratic institutions and as such are autonomous and self-governing. In addition, he offered that ultimate authority rests in our membership that delegates the authority to govern to our elected Board of Trustees. He further went on to say that if we are living up to the values expressed in the 5th Principle, we have the right to expect within our congregation:

- Free and open discussions of the congregation's practices and policies
- A 'free press' in which members share their opinions of our practices and policies
- Opportunity for input and to vote on decisions governing mission and vision
- Transparency in organizational decision-making

After these orienting remarks, individuals were randomly assigned to small groups, mostly of 5 people. Each group had a facilitator and a note-taker. (A list of these individuals appears at the end of the report). A training session for facilitators and note-takers was held the week before; training materials appear at the end of this report. Within the groups, each person was given 3 minutes to speak to each of the three Questions. This was followed by time within the group for questions and comments among the participants. The final step in the small groups consisted of the note-taker summarizing what had been said. The groups then returned to the large group where each note-taker reported what had transpired within each group.

Results

Approximately 40 participants were engaged in the Structured Dialogue process. Overall, there was great enthusiasm and appreciation for the opportunity to express their thoughts and be listened to within a safe space. Many expressions of gratitude were voiced and encouraged the continuation of the practice of Structured Dialogues. The comments of the individuals in the groups were summarized by Tim Richards, and five major themes emerged: Communication and Participation, Free Speech, Transparency and Trust, Congregational Involvement, and Governance/Leadership. The raw data appear as an addendum to this report. Here are some examples of what people said.

Question 1: As you consider the right of conscience and democratic practices at UUAA, what are your thoughts about it?

Communication and Participation

- The congregation needs regularly scheduled, structured opportunities to express and discuss our ideas and to give feedback, suggestions and preferences. Also, to raise issues of concern including controversial issues as well as praising the things we like.

Free Speech

- Our current culture encourages self-censorship. All opinions must be heard. No cancel culture. We are drifting to more emphasis on covenant and less on (our seven) principles.

Transparency and Trust

- Transparency builds trust. We need more transparency on how and why decisions are made.

Congregational Involvement

- We need to find ways to encourage members to be responsible citizens of this democratic body and participate in its governance. Democratic principles are at play within our congregation but there is not much participation.

Governance/Leadership

- UUAA needs to remain an independent governing unit.

Question 2: Thinking about the future at UUAA, what would you like the 'right of conscience' and democratic practices to be in place?

Communication and Participation

- More forums like this are needed. We (need to) encourage feedback and have vital and vigorous community conversations on all relevant issues.

Free Speech

- Would like to see a place where we have a culture of trust and members feel free to express their opinion. (Where) we honor diversity and the right to disagree and have respect for different opinions.

Transparency and Trust

- Ideally, all organizational decisions are made with transparency.

Congregational involvement

- The Leadership Development Team will educate congregants to be effective leaders and promote the notion that all congregants should serve as senior leaders at some point in their membership. Gathering tables held every Fall. Celebration and reflection activities held on an annual cycle.

Governance/ Leadership

- UUAA's mission is clearly stated, but the process of 'electing' members of the Board is seriously flawed.

Question 3: What concrete actions could we start doing now to achieve the practices we want in the future?

Communication and Participation

- More dialogues and conversations and forums. More opportunities for feedback. The UUAA Newsletter needs more substance; not just a calendar of events.

Free Speech

- Let's embrace a willingness to hear what congregants are saying. Need to have a discussion on the meaning of 'covenant' and 'out of covenant.'

Transparency and Trust

- Many voiced the need for multiple candidacies for leadership positions with a few supporting the status quo.

Congregational Involvement

- The need for more 'on ramps' for members to get involved in leadership. Invitations to participate are an important element.

Governance /Leadership

- The BOT needs to develop more robust systems for keeping in touch with the congregational membership, both listening and informing. Re-designing the choice of General Assembly delegates so that it is more representative of the congregation. Incentivize interest by subsidizing the cost of attending. Informing the congregation of the GA agenda as soon as it is known.

This summary accounts for approximately 86% of the comments that were offered during the Structured Dialogue. A much smaller number of responses were categorized under three categories: Budget Process, Groups/Teams/ Committees, and Sunday Service.

Recommendations

For UUAA

There is a need for many more opportunities as well as a greater variety of formats to listen to what congregants think and want to communicate regarding the mission, policies, and practices currently in place. Participants expressed concern about how 'speaking' out on controversial topics would be received.

There is a need for greater transparency regarding how important decisions are made. One place to begin would be to utilize the monthly and weekly newsletters as venues where detailed information about current policies and practices would be offered as well as places where robust discussions are welcome, perhaps via a 'letters to the editor' column.

There is a need for information regarding the development and meaning of important concepts such as 'right behavior' and 'out of covenant' as well as an explanation of the various committees that seem to be tasked with the responsibility for managing the implications of these concepts.

There needs to be a robust attempt to engage more individuals in the democratic practices of UUAA including election to the Board, appointment to various committees, and delegation to UUA.

There needs to be a greater appreciation and understanding of the independent nature of the relationship between UUAA and the UUA.

For the Humanist Study Group

Based on the energetic enthusiasm that was expressed, the Humanist Study Group will offer more Structured Dialogues that address the meaning and implications of living the Seven Principles. It appears that affording the congregation an opportunity to safely express their thoughts regarding an important UU principle hit a responsive chord within its members. The experience reinforced the timeless nature of what Roy Wood Sellars was speaking to: "the church's willingness to discuss anything freely and to look on all sides of every question".

There needs to be a greater emphasis on the recruitment and training of facilitators so that more individuals can be accommodated in future Structured Dialogues.

There needs to be a more effective way of inviting congregants to participate as well as an exploration of the possibility of recording the Dialogues so as to free up note-takers to become facilitators and provide greater accuracy in the reporting of the content.

The Sub-committee offers sincere thanks to these facilitators and note-takers: Tom Bauld, Jim Breck, Larry Cooper, Edie Croak, Bruce Gibb, Nancy Homburg, Edie Hough, Terry Madden, Tim Richards, Bennett Stark, Phil Tuchinsky, Ruth Vail. A special thanks to Hal Breidenbach for lending his time and expertise to this endeavor.

Respectively submitted by the Structured Dialogue Sub-committee of the Humanist Study Group:
Jim Breck, Hal Breidenbach, Steve Camron, Bruce Gibb, Edythe Hough, Terry Madden,
Tim Richards, and Bennett Stark.