

Many Participants expressed appreciation for this opportunity for Dialogue.

Summary of Responses to the Dialogue Questions:

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

A. Communication

More open dialogue needed at all levels

- We need a more public, effective process for the congregational discussion of controversial issues so that congregants feel their voice has been heard;
- Congregation needs regularly scheduled, structured opportunities to express and discuss our ideas – to give feedback and suggestions, and to express our preferences, to raise issues of concern and to praise the things we like.
- We need “safe practice areas” to discuss complicated issues.
- The quick, short, electronic surveys done in some Sunday services are good; but these are not sufficient for feedback or discussion; and we typically don’t get public feedback summarizing the results of those brief surveys.

- UU is changing a lot. We don’t know where we are going or why.

B. Free Speech & Right of Conscience

- There is a perception that there are limits on what is acceptable speech. What are acceptable subjects for discussion groups? How can we manage difficult conversations? Who is responsible for those conversations?
- Our current culture encourages self-censorship. UUAA formerly was a refuge for heretics. What will our future hold? We worry about being “out of covenant”
- We currently do not enjoy a free press. There is no mechanism available to publish/disseminate opinions on issues and concerns
- Need Letter to the editor column in newsletter
- All opinions must be heard. No cancel culture.
- It would be helpful to have resources to help us to respect one’s own opinion and a competing or contrary opinion.
- When discussing racism and oppression we are told we must face up to “uncomfortable” discussions. However, when an international human rights issue that has been thoroughly studied by many members of the congregation for a couple of

decades leads to inviting the entire congregation to discuss the possibility of taking an action related to that issue, the BoT decided that because some people in the congregation are uncomfortable discussing the issue the matter should be postponed. It makes us Ann Arbor UUs look like we are very selective about what racism and oppression that we are willing to discuss, let alone act on.

- UUAA handles the “right of Conscience” half of the Fifth Principle well. Congregants are generally welcome to believe as they wish and to express their views.
- We are drifting to more covenant and less principles.
- More attention to free-thinkers, diverse range of thinkers, secular subjects and Speakers
- Don’t see restrictions on right of conscience
- I agree that all voices should be heard but I welcome help in listening to other and contrary views.
- The real meaning of Right of conscience is unclear.
- We need to talk with each other on difficult matters. Concern was expressed regarding the censure of Rev. Todd Eklof; it is being whispered about in the congregation.

C. Democratic Practices: Transparency & Trust

- General Assembly Delegates. The congregation has not been actively informed of the issues to be addressed at GA nor involved in determining who will represent us at GA.
- We have had some success with projects involving the whole congregation such as the Vision 2050 project which was “democracy at work.”
- Democracy means participation and communication, which can be challenging in a large congregation. The pandemic has also been a barrier to communication. We do well with small groups.
- Due Process is an element of the democratic process; being declared “out of covenant” is not democratic.
- I have (unstated) concerns about the UUAA democratic process.
- We need to live up to the votes we make as a congregation: we voted to be a “Congregation”, but the term “church” is still used in our covenant statement that we say each Sunday.
- There are major deficiencies in UUAA’s democratic practices. We pretend to be a democracy, are we? Who are our board members? Executive decisions made by those entitled to leadership.
- Transparency builds trust.
- To credibly promote democratic practices “in society at large”, UUAA must be a model of democratic practices in its internal activities. Anything less is hypocrisy.
- New rules require that a very high percentage of voters (80% was mentioned) approve any resolution brought before a congregational meeting. This appears to be designed to prevent meaningful consideration of anything at all controversial, including the BDS Petition (brought before the 2018-19 BoT, but never presented for a congregational vote).

- UUA at the national level has become overly “woke” and could harm local churches like ours. One example is the Article II study group and the consideration of the 8th principle. UUAA should be careful not to accept UUA policies it doesn’t like.
- We need to be able to vote on matters of culture and language.
- We need to live up to the votes we make as a congregation: we voted to be a “Congregation”, but the term “church” is still used in our covenant statement that we say each Sunday.
- Organizational decision-making lacks transparency: For democracy to work, people need to be educated. Need more education about issues.
- Important decisions are made in a “democratic vacuum.” There is little opportunity to discuss important issues. Too little info on what are board issues, we need more transparency. We need more information sharing. We need respect for different opinions. We need more participation, more transparency, more emphasis on our principles.
- UUAA was painfully slow in requiring that congregants prove they are vaccinated against Covid-19 before entering the UUAA building. This potentially placed congregants at risk of contracting this potentially fatal pandemic. Precious process corrupted by executives and their bureaucracy
- Democracy is a matter of trust; leadership hasn’t earned our trust.
- The quick, short, electronic surveys done in some Sunday services are not sufficient for feedback or discussion; and we typically don’t get public feedback summarizing the results of those brief surveys.
- We need more transparency on how and why decisions are made. (Why was Social Justice leader fired?)
- To build and maintain trust we need more transparency and accountability.
- Transparency is a responsibility of congregants as well as the Board. The meeting minutes are posted, meetings are open, and anyone can request time to present to the Board.
- UUAA offers its congregants no voice in choosing those “elected” to its senior leadership roles (BoT and LDT membership). Congregants have no voice regarding those nominated, no organized awareness of what nominees believe or may have as agendas and no choice except to vote for the nominees selected (one per available office) by LDT and BoT. This amounts to selection of new senior lay leaders entirely by the existing senior lay leaders.
- Democracy is a fundamentally competitive activity, intended to create discourse – a marketplace of ideas – about diverse approaches to democratic governance, with choices made by the citizenry. UUAA dispenses entirely with competition, conducts no discourse in its election process and permits no choices.
- Contested elections could be divisive.
- Leaders prefer a peaceful process.
- BoT elections haven’t really been elections.
- Having two or more individuals running for a position, whether on the BoT or an important committee, does not necessarily mean a change in the mission. It only

indicates that there are many ways of achieving the same goal and that different people bring different skill sets.

- Competitive campaigns for all senior leadership positions
- 2 candidates for every position, fewer cliques

D. Congregational Involvement/Community

- The congregation's membership is UUAA's ultimate authority:
- We congregants create the platform followed by BoT through their election of the BoT.
- How could the congregants develop alternative "platforms"? UUAA needs consistency year-to-year.
- Balancing participation in congregational programs and activities and responsibilities for work, family, etc. is challenging for many members.
- We need to find ways to encourage members to be responsible citizens of this democratic body by participating in its governance. Democratic principles are at play within our congregation but there is not much participation.
- A message on the UUAA website states, "[Members are expected to take part in Congregational Meetings \(usually twice per year\) and to vote for elected leaders and on issues presented regarding unusual expenditures, statements of conscience and other congregational matters.](#)" However, congregational attendance and participation in congregational meetings is quite low. Congregational meetings are rather pro forma and don't promote congregant involvement.

E. Governance/Leadership

- The congregation has grown larger and its governance more centralized.
- UUAA needs to remain the independent governing unit all Unitarian congregations were identified to be in the 1965 Constitution, written when Unitarians and Universalists merged. I worry about UUA that by wanting individual congregations to be held accountable that UUA is attempting to override the UUAA Congregation's right of self-governance and autonomy.
- Power flows to friends of those in power. Sorry never asked to serve. Little power is given to new voices.
- UUA gives homogenous message; questions are not addressed, instead glossed over. Leaders should be accountable to address our concerns.
- UUAA is represented at GA by our delegates. Up until 2019 anyone who volunteered to be a Delegate was so named. In 2020 and 2021 the BoT decided it would determine who would and could not be delegates. The congregation has not been actively informed of the issues to be addressed at GA nor involved in determining who will represent us at GA.
- The Board is currently very involved with employment contracts and sharing of responsibilities with loss of positions.

- Currently, all the members of UUAA’s Governance Advisory Team are members of the congregation. Therein lies the potential for conflicts of interests to occur.

F. Budget Process

- Although the annual UUAA budget comes before a congregational meeting for approval, congregants are largely left out of its development.
- I want to see more detailed budget information and more input from the congregation at large in the annual budgeting process.

G. Groups/Teams/Committees

- Many lay groups are involved in social justice work, in which Social Justice Council provides a larger, integrative conversation.
- New committees, such as LOV Committee, were created without congregational input. LOV Committee can discipline congregants as “out of covenant”, having never defined what “out of covenant” means. The mere existence of this committee may make congregants afraid to express their views, for fear of discipline.
- The LOV Committee sees its work as educating and counseling congregants toward right behavior.
- People feel shut out of leadership despite the presence of the Leadership Development Team. (LDT is discussing how to reach out to congregational groups and to people to join groups, especially younger members. LDT is considering increasing its membership from 5 to 7 and removing the requirement that it include a BoT member. The rationale for increasing the # is to increase the cross-sectional representation of the congregational membership.)
- There are several lay led committees/teams listed on the website and some that are not, implicitly responsible to the BoT. However, some of them report to the Senior Minister. This raises the question, does our actual committee structure comply with our bylaws that separate “Operations” from governance?

H. Sunday Services need to concentrate more on liberal religion and thought, less on action.

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

A. Communication (Communication still our major problem. How are we inclusive?)

- We have more forums like this. We have lots of forums like this for sharing information, for listening and talking with one another. (This dialogue is a really good start.)

- Other congregations consult with us/look to us to learn how to function as a fully democratic congregation that honors the right of conscience.
- More congregation-wide conversations. We encourage feedback from the congregation.
- More opportunities for a sharing of thoughts: forums, lay-lead conversations, dialogues....
- More open discussion about controversial issues.
- Regular and scheduled channels of communication from board and Sr Minister.
- We have more forums. We have structured ways of meeting to discuss issues.
- We have structures and processes in place for congregational members to communicate with each other, especially to take time to listen in the spirit of love and trust.
- We are open to multiple views on key issues. (For example, UUAA's Covid response was an instance where a congregational vote should have been held.)
- We have vital and vigorous community conversations on all relevant issues.
- We offer more information to our community.
- We have a formal organizational structure for having discussions of issues that we need to learn more about.

B. Free Speech and the Right of Conscience

- We have a culture of trust; members feel free to express their opinions (which is not the case NOW. Sometimes there is a perception of (self?) censorship. There are some subjects we will not address such as White vs. Marginalized (Minority) participation in governance and direction. We feel that unless we are willing to have "hard conversations", we are not UU's. What does "out of covenant" or "right behavior" mean? The lack of clarity leads to fear and suppression of ideas. What is the definition of "out of covenant"? We have a bad system currently for conflict resolution. "Love Committee" appointed by Sr Minister. Member need training, but should be elected.)
- We honor diversity and right to disagree and we honor diversity of beliefs and opinions.
- We have figured out ways to handle and prioritize issue discussions after experimenting with various ways to handle and allocate our time, and to get more people interested and engaged.
- We have respect for different opinions and open discussion of these differences. (We don't need UU's at the national level describing us as racists, our denomination in moral collapse, and punitive mechanisms established.)

C. Democratic Practices: Transparency & Trust

- All organizational decisions are made transparently.
- The Congregation's mission is stated clearly.
- The congregation's membership trusts the congregational leadership.
- The leadership has earned trust through transparency.
- We have a system in place that exhibits these five components of trust: Competence; Truth; action on commitments; decisions are made in the interests of the congregation; congregational leadership's actions benefit the congregation.

D. Congregational Involvement/Community (How do people get to be a part of UUAA? How do we get from outsider to insider?)

- LDT actively educates congregants to be effective leaders and promotes the notion that all congregants should serve as senior leaders at some point in their membership.
- LDT's membership has increased to enable the group to develop leadership. LDT visits UUAA lay activity centers to see whether leaders there are ready to lead at a higher level.
- More decisions are made by a democratic process, e.g., UUA delegate selection.
- Gathering Tables are continued.
- A structure exists to work for working on the three priority areas that were identified in the recent prioritizing process.
- There is more interest generated in congregational meetings. Congregants have reasons to attend and get engaged. Instead of having leadership propose actions to be adopted and being open only to Q& A, meetings are organized according to Robert's Rules of Order with pro, con & procedural mics, so that a fuller range of opinions can be heard and debated.
- BoT agendas are published two weeks in advance to enable congregants who wish to speak at a BoT meeting to register (currently, they are required to apply a week in advance).
- Open forums are held for the presentation and discussion of controversial issues.
- Gathering tables are held in the fall. Celebration and reflection are held on annual cycle.
- There is a suggestion box at UUAA and there is a mechanism for responses.
- Our membership values participation because members see that their participation is valued by congregational leadership. (The 20/50 Vision process is a good example of a really good democratic process for getting meaningful congregational input.)

E. Governance/Leadership

- The Congregation's mission is stated clearly.
- The majority of Governance Advisory Team members are from outside UUAA.

F. Budget Process

- The BoT has an open budgeting process.
- The membership is provided with more information on the budget process, e.g., why and how cuts were made and the reasoning behind hiring and firing decisions. (Why was a consultant hired to help us process grief over loss of Dr Glen Thomas?)

G. Sunday Services

- More information sharing at Sunday services.
- We have Meatier sermons.
- Congregational membership has a say in the content of Sunday Services:
- Periodic reports from Social Justice groups,

- Joys and concerns (Getting rid of Joys & Sorrows may have been a mistake; instead of eliminating it, maybe we could manage it better.)
- Sunday Services focus on questions, not so much worship.

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

Appreciates this Dialogue! Personal invitation by email was most effective.

Appreciates the work Humanist Study Group has done on these Dialogues.

A. Communication:

- This session is a good start. We need to share more information.
- Make conversations more available so we get used to hearing each other.
- We need a program on the proposed 8th Principle.
- LOV Committee brings people before their peers to provide help and improve communication.
- Hold BoT and ministerial listening sessions and a better budgeting process. Listening sessions are welcome and needed.
- More newsletter substance, not just an event calendar.
- More dialogs and deep dives into 7 Principles and our UU sources.
- More Dialogues
- Have a formal process for having forums.
- Messages need to be said over and over for them to take hold.
- Provide space for the general categories. Extend beyond UUAA.
- Learn to have safe conversations on difficult issues.
- Have regular structured meetings to discuss issues in engaged feedback. (Reflect, evaluate, and improve.)
- Develop structures and processes for cross communication and coordination among and between the many groups involved in doing the work of the congregation.
- Need to change the vertical silos so that there is horizontal communication.

B. Right of Conscience/Free Speech

- We need a program (forum, dialogue, discussion ...) on "Covenant". What does that mean to UUAA? What does "out of covenant" mean? Cancel culture? Is this dangerous?
- We would like to have an open space for idea sharing. (Newsletter?)
- Place value the words "I might be wrong".
- Let's embrace a willingness to hear what congregants are saying.
- Letters to the editor, board agenda, who is on board, how to reach with questions or concerns.

- Develop a publicly known, effective process which allows important issues to be discussed, disagreed on, cross talk/questions, results of which influence decisions.
- Create a process which would air different points of view but not cause a schism.
- Newsletter should be more than a listing of events; should include letters to the editor on topics pertaining to congregational issues and concerns.

C. Democratic Practices: Transparency & Trust

- Needs to be clear how the results of a forum or group work influence a decision.
- Made so people feel it's worthwhile to participate.
- Advance notice of meeting along with any materials which pertain to it.
- Publish BOT Meeting Agendas in advance of meetings.
- Develop measures so that members of the congregation can identify misinformation.
- Multiple candidacies for leadership positions.
- I don't favor competitive elections. Contested elections (two persons running for one office) would cause factions within the congregation. Our leaders need to represent the welfare of the congregation as a whole, not a faction who voted for them.

D. Congregational Involvement/Community

- Offer Activities and structure which would foster more connection/community.
- Greater congregant participation
- Publicize open leadership positions more widely and more often.
- Reform cannot come from the senior leaders. It must come from the membership.
- It's appropriate that congregants be leaders sometimes and be appropriate followers.
- More "on-ramps" can be found to get more members involved in leadership.
- Create ways for more involvement with the congregation.
- It really matters if someone INVITES you to participate.
- Improve methods of inviting members to join committees, stand for election, etc.
- We need a process for helping UUAA emerge from the pandemic and return to meeting in person.

E. Governance/Leadership

- We could petition for sound democratic practices.
- Make resolutions and change by small, open steps.
- Review/revise mission and have the congregation approve.
- Annual and Semi-annual Congregational Meetings should include Open Discussion Time.
- Re-evaluate recent bylaw change regarding congregant sponsored resolutions.
- Board and Sr Minister have responsibility to engender and maintain trust. Increase info from board. Share info on a calendar basis.
- Consider more reparation to Indigenous peoples.

- Regarding GA: Before GA, have a congregation-wide discussion of GA matters, especially any controversial votes that will occur and hear the views of our congregants, so GA delegates can (democratically) represent our congregation. GA delegates should report back to the congregation after GA. Include listening sessions.
- GA Delegate Candidates and congregants share their thinking regarding the GA agenda in a forum ~ 2 weeks before the Spring Congregational meeting. In the Spring Congregational meeting invite Delegate Candidates to briefly share their thoughts before attendees vote on who will represent the congregation at GA.
- Require that GA Delegates report on their activities, what they learned, the business, how they voted and why, within ~two weeks after GA.
- Design the GA delegation to be more representative of the congregation. Incentivize interest in being a GA delegate by subsidizing their cost. Inform the congregation of the GA agenda as soon as it is known.
- Regarding creation of regularly scheduled, structured opportunities to discuss and give feedback: Have a forum to discuss this idea; get suggestions from the Governance Advisory Team; have the BoT propose a way to work this into the annual process of governing and decision-making.
- Modify the composition of the Governance Advisory Team to minimize the potential appearance of possible conflicts of interest by limiting the committee to one UUAA member and select the other members from outside UUAA (e.g.- a UU, a non-profit).
- Not all issues should be voted on by the congregation.
- BOT needs to develop more robust system for keeping in touch with the congregational membership, both listening and informing.

F. Budget

- Provide fully detailed budgetary information on the website – we never see a line-item level of detail.
- I'd like the budget to reflect meaningful conversations about priorities, needs, options... the budget should be a response to and follow from democratic practices.

G Groups/Teams/Committees

- Operate the LOV team so that it is primarily a positive force.
- Elect some or all members of Shared Ministry Team and Living Our Values Team.

H. Sunday Services:

- More lay leadership on Sunday morning.

- Reflect on whether the language used in services would enable an atheist to feel welcome.
- Secular subjects in services not faith.
- Rev. Manish is widely respected. He has wide knowledge and talent that he should use to benefit this community.

Submitted by Tim Richards

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