

# The State of Our Fellowship

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

December 8, 2013

Bob Weekley, the Board of Stewards, and other key members will lead a discussion about our own UU Fellowship of the Rappahannock. What is our purpose? Are we meeting the needs of our members, friends, and the larger community? This is about vision, planning, and feedback. Come to learn more and to offer your ideas about our future direction. After the service and refreshments the annual (short) business meeting will be held.

Projects funded this year:

Crisis/Helping Hand Fund

Hallway Art Gallery

Entrance Walkway/Handrail

Gathering Deck

Other developments

Dedication of Pathways of Remembrance

Ladies Luncheon

RE

Support for our Eagle Scout – and vice versa

Building Expansion

Welcome

Bob

Song: #116 “I’m On My Way”

Opening Words

Caroline

Chalice Lighting

Dave

Joys and Concerns

Judi

Song: #354 “We Laugh, We Cry”

Responsive Reading #569

Bill leads congregation

Silent reflection/meditation

Offering

Lynn

Talk: The State of Our Fellowship

Discussion

Song: #121 “We’ll Build A Land”

Closing Words

Bob

A recent poll asked the following questions:

- How many close friends do you have?
- With how many people can you have deep meaningful discussions, or take action together on issues that are close to your heart?

The results of the poll were surprising to me.

- On average, Americans have only two close friends.
- Nearly 25% of Americans report they have ZERO people with whom they can discuss the deeply important matters of life.

The success and vitality of our UU Fellowship of the Rappahannock has a strong connection to this poll. We are a fellowship community. We are all about connecting with each other, and reaching out to those who have not found us yet. Here we make connections that are much deeper and more meaningful than many of the other acquaintances we all have.

Recently our soon-to-be Eagle Scout, Ronnie Cutler, came to interview me as part of his Boy Scout project of exploring Unitarian Universalism. One of his excellent questions really made me stop and think:

“What appeals to you most about belonging to a UU fellowship?”

What would be your short response to Ronnie’s question?

[Ask for 3 volunteer responses.]

My own response illuminates the poll results described above. I have not ZERO, but MANY people in my life that I can share deeply with – and many are in this room. I can go to a nice community social function and have pleasant conversations about this and that – but not about some of the things that matter most in our lives – how we feel about the “big questions.”

In the December *Chalice* President’s corner I summed up my feeling about our Fellowship this way:

*UUFR shines the floodlight of reason and the illumination of religious exploration. This Fellowship combines a search for genuine spirituality with a respect for asking the great questions and for rejecting dogmatic solutions.*

*I believe that in this time of religious turmoil, a time of widespread withdrawal from many traditional churches, there is an unmet – often unrecognized – yearning for the kind of faith community where one can ask the hard questions, express the built up skepticism and frustration, and build relationships with fellow seekers. This is why we need to rededicate ourselves to the building and support of this UU community.*

*Growth for the sake of growth? No! Growth to meet the needs of the people who need what we offer – though they may not yet know we are here or what we are.*

How is UUFR doing so far? Here is the 2013 state of our Fellowship:

1. Participation. Our members do participate enthusiastically in the activities and the work of the Fellowship! I find it exciting that members are continually bringing new ideas. As interests evolve, new activities are initiated and some of the previous ones are dropped. The Fellowship is truly governed by the members. The Board is more of a coordination center than a governing center.
2. Financial status. The UUFR is financially well supported by the congregation, and is on a sound financial footing. In addition to being debt-free and self-supporting, we dedicate a share of our annual budget to community organizations devoted to the health and welfare of people in the Northern Neck and Middle Peninsula. Beyond our local community, we recently received a letter from the President of the UU Association, Rev. Peter Morales, recognizing UUFR as an honor congregation for our generous support of the national needs of the Unitarian Universalists.
3. Membership. Our membership has been steady. Each year we have losses as people move away or undergo some transition in their lives, but new members have found us.
4. Preparing for the future. We are actively envisioning and planning our future path. Our congregation spoke out about its interest in three major areas. The Board has incorporated these three initiatives into our Five-Year Plan.
  - Focused community engagement and social justice – finding our special “niche” in meeting community needs.
  - Expansion of our building to meet our expanding needs and to accommodate the next generation
  - The need for ministerial and/or administrative support.
 I will cover more on these three initiatives a little later.

How do we maintain this healthy Fellowship and grow to meet greater needs?

- By widespread sharing of the work of this lay-led Fellowship.
  - Participation leads to greater individual satisfaction – builds the sense that it belongs to each and every member.
  - Work is subdivided and shared – in accordance with our varied talents, interests, and time.
- Working and building together brings us together. The joy of fellowship.

What are some of the tangible accomplishments of this past year? Completed projects included:

- Paths of Remembrance memorial area. We saw the completion of the memorial stone with its plaques for our deceased members. We enjoyed a very touching dedication of the memorial area. Janet Hemming led this memorial area project.
- The beautiful gathering deck, where we can fellowship in good weather thanks to the engineering and project management by Tom Kinney, Dave Dustin, a volunteer crew of laborers, and financial support by the congregation.

- The overhead pergola for the deck, Ronnie Cutler's Eagle Scout project. He raised funds, designed the complex structure, and led the volunteers in building it.
- New, attractive, and durable safety railings on the pathway leading to the sanctuary. Installed by Dave Dustin and volunteers.
- This year we moved forward with our UU For Kids program on a once per month basis. Children's programs have been a challenge for this congregation populated in large part by older members. Now we often see up to five children on the first Sunday of the month for UU for Kids. This is an area that we need to build on – attracting young families is vital to the future of the UUFR. Sue Adriance, with the support of several others, has been the leader in organizing UU for Kids.
- Yard sale project – thanks to Paula Greenwood and her crew. This was a true win-win-win. It raised funds for UUFR; it recycled our “stuff,” providing provided people with low cost goods; and it gave the donors an opportunity for charitable tax deductions as well as giving them more room in the attic.
- Book sales (in UUFR and to Amazon) thanks to Shirley Kinney; recycling and fundraising combined!
- You funded and installed the fittings for our hallway art gallery. Thanks to our artists and our Imagine That! crafts group for putting the gallery to use.
- Your funds established a Crisis/Helping Hand fund that can be used discretionally to help someone with an unexpected crisis.
- We are actively pursuing the acquisition and preservation of additional adjacent land to meet the needs of future generations of UUFR.

Getting back to the three major initiatives I mentioned –

- Kristi VanAudenhove is leading the community “niche” community service and social justice activity I mentioned. Subcommittees led by Mike Knez, Dave Dustin, and Tom Kinney have been meeting with community organizations to help us develop workable action plans for improving the lives of the children in our communities. Specifically these efforts are dealing with the problems caused by hunger and poor nutrition, and with helping prepare the pre-school children of families living in poverty to develop the social, emotional, and academic skills to prepare them for school. Kristi is taking this one step at a time to insure that we understand the local environment and that we take on elements of the poverty problem in areas where we can truly make a difference.
  - The next major meeting of the overall niche group is set for April 13. Between now and then additional research and community meetings will be held so that by the April meeting we can have a better understanding of how to meet our goals.
- To prepare for the building expansion I mentioned, Bill Gimpel is leading a building committee to assess the needs for flexible space for children, for congregational and community activities, and for administrative space. The

committee is developing an architectural plan for adding such space to our existing building.

- The congregation also has raised the need to consider acquiring professional leadership as it becomes feasible. This could be a part-time minister or an administrator. The experience of other small UU Fellowships and churches in our region has been that having a minister, even part time, has been a great stimulus and provides a “face of the Fellowship” in the community. This initiative is in the information-gathering stage.

Today we are recognizing some of those who have been especially engaged, using their time and talents on behalf of this Fellowship.

Members of the Board of Stewards. In addition to their Board activities, all of these have taken on other key functions in the work of this Fellowship.

- Bill Gimpel, Vice President. I mentioned his leadership on the Building Committee as well.
- Dave Dustin, Secretary, soon to be your new President of the Board.
- Lynn Langley, Treasurer
- Caroline Shifflett, Past President
- Shirley Kinney, Program Committee Chair
- Judi Caples, Membership Committee Chair

Trustees:

- Barbara Haynes
- Marge Rowden
- Tom Kinney

Main Committees

Program Committee – Shirley Kinney. What it does:

- Sunday Speaker Calendar. Continual surveys of congregational preferences and needs. Correlates attendance to speakers.
  - Balance of intellectual and spiritual talks – for our brains and our hearts. Balance of guest speakers and our own UUFR speakers.
- Music for services. Enhanced with efforts of Hank Stupi to showcase some of the congregation’s hidden talents.
- Phood, Philosophy and Philm – dinner and discussion evenings: films to be interspersed month to month.
- Special events – such as the exciting and successful Cabaret, produced by Diana Jamison.

Membership Committee – Judi Caples

- Maintains membership lists, establishes contact with members who have not been attending to determine if they have needs we can help with.
- Sets up and maintains Caring Circles, roughly according to geographic proximity, to maintain contact with members and friends and to rotate

providing support for Sunday services like: providing greeters, bringing refreshments, etc.

- Taking on special events that bring UUFR into the community. An example the past two years was serving a breakfast to the YMCA-sponsored Yoga Retreat at Camp Kekoka.

## NEED TO FILL THIS OUT

Finance Committee, Tom Kinney. The Finance Committee report will be presented during the short business meeting that will follow the service today.

Faith in Action. This organization is under construction as it combines our long-standing Community Service Committee with Social Justice and the community “niche” activity I mentioned that Kristi VanAudenhove is heading up. Temporarily the Community Service element will be headed up by Lynn Langley and Shirley Kinney. In addition Pam Collins provides coordination with the Food Bank and reminds us to donate our funds and food.

Building and Grounds Committee, Dave and Terrie Dustin. Obviously this committee oversees the maintenance of the building and grounds. Many others participate in the upkeep – mowing grass, pulling weeds, ... . Pam Collins took on the work of developing and maintaining the lovely butterfly garden. Often Lolly Riley lends a hand. Bob and Sue Adriance, who have planned and installed the flowers, shrubs, and grasses of our landscape, have continued to beautify it. Opportunity: Their home is on the market and they may be—I’m sorry to say—moving one of these days. Here is an opportunity for a person or two who would like to team up to continue the beautification of our landscape.

Leadership Development Committee: Caroline Shifflett, Pirkko Graves, and Janet Hemming. This committee surveys the membership to help match people to areas where they might enjoy volunteer service to the Fellowship.

UU for Kids. Kristi VanAudenhove has agreed to head this up with the support of Chris Gimpel, Sue Adriance, and Terrie Dustin. Susan Johnson’s daughter, Aline, has been helping with this kids program.

## Publicity

- Newsletter and Web Site: Bob Prescott does a professional job on this. He is assisted by Elaine Weekley who applies a sharp editor’s eye before final publication and handles the printing and mailing. By request, the newsletter goes not only to the active congregation but also to many others, even outside the U.S., who are friends that want to be kept informed.
- Bulletins: Hank Stupi took over the responsibility for the Sunday Bulletins this year. Somehow he gets all the announcements and songs in there.

- Community news: Pam Collins has provided contact with the community newspapers to publicize our Sunday services.
- Facebook: Susan Johnson took the initiative this year to set UUFR up on Facebook. This has been a wonderful way to increase awareness of the UUFR.
- Thea Marshall contributes her expert writing skills to special projects that come up.
- Lay-Pastoral Care. UUFR has established a small team to provide personal and confidential support for grieving, illness, injury, disability, marital changes, isolation, or other matters where members indicate a need for such support. Fran Schelling, Diana Jamison, Pirkko Graves, and Bob Weekley currently make up this team.

It must be obvious by now that UUFR exists for much more than to meet on Sunday mornings to sing and listen to sermons. There is such a range of opportunities for fellowship and service that brings us together. These activities are open to all UUFR members and friends. Some of the other activities I haven't mentioned include:

- River Readers book group, meeting monthly to discuss books of major interest. Folks who are not from UUFR, but who are attracted by our book program also attend this group. Elaine Weekley is the coordinator of this group.
- Imagine That! This is a group of creative-minded people who meet at Shirley Kinney's craft and art studio to explore new artistic techniques and materials.
- Yoga. While not a UUFR program as such, Susan Johnson, a popular and highly qualified yoga teacher, holds her classes for all levels of yoga here at UUFR. A portion of the proceeds from her classes goes to UUFR, and UUFR members receive a discount on her popular classes.
- Ladies Luncheon. Every month a good number of women from UUFR gather to celebrate friendship and fellowship around the table. They have convened at many of the restaurants in the area. This is a wonderful example of how our members, in this case Eve Jordan, take the initiative to start programs and activities that bring us together.
- Sing Out. Another self-started initiative is the monthly, Sunday evening Sing Out. Diana Jamison started this tradition, meeting on the fourth Sunday evening of each month. Members and friends gather to sing, play musical instruments, and fellowship together. Talent isn't required. It's just fun and rewarding to be with happy people.
- Annual Retreat. For many years, during the fall, UUFR has held a three-day retreat during the fall. This is a wonderful time to really get to know one another. These retreats include group exercises that are both fun and have a spiritual component, outdoor recreation, meditations, and of course – food and fellowship. Shirley, Pirkko Graves, and Thea Marshall planned the activities at this years retreat. Bill Gimpel coordinated the logistics.

- Our annual picnic, usually held at Roger and Liz Failmezger's beautiful home on the Rappahannock River, is another time we set aside to get to know each other better.

Do I see challenges as I present this annual report? I do not see any existential challenges to our continuing to maintain a healthy, growing fellowship. But, I do know that some fellowships have dwindled and faded after their initial years of healthy growth, because as their founding generation gradually left the scene, new growth had not been achieved to pick up their mission. This concern gives us the incentive to reach out to those who could join us, but don't really know who we are yet. One of my most gratifying experiences as President has been when a new member comes to me and tells me how happy she or he is to have discovered the UU Fellowship of the Rappahannock.

Have you noticed in the description of these activities how many names appear more than once? In describing how a small fellowship like UUFR can take on so much, it is because people pitch in. They find joy in working with a group with a mission such as ours – ***To put Unitarian Universalist Principles into practice through programs that empower spiritual exploration, critical thinking, social service, and provide a spiritual home for future generations.***