

Our Future in Community:  
Report of the Strategic Planning Committee

Harrisonburg Unitarian  
Universalists

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*Imagined futures are always more about where we have been  
than where we are going.*

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## Assumptions, Analysis, and Rationale

Developed by the HUU Strategic Planning Committee over the last five months, the goals and proposals that follow represent a consensus about future possibilities: both the specific steps we might take and the more general direction we might chart as we move forward into the next five years of our future as a congregation.

As a snapshot of possibilities these goals and proposals are certainly not exhaustive. But we believe they offer a decidedly new approach to the future, one that would require substantial change in the way we understand our mission and message and thus in the way we view ourselves as a congregation. As such we believe they offer the chance for new initiatives that accord both with the logic of our unfolding history and the requirements of our future growth and development.

### Outside The Box

The size and scope of our task were humbling. Our charge was not just to envision the future. It was to avoid the historical trap of merely reinventing the past as we attempted to imagine what our future might be. The future that we sought to envision would require “thinking outside the box” rather than merely revisiting and repackaging the conventional wisdom well known to us all.

That certainly is what some congregants believe we have done repeatedly at HUU. Again and again we examine and discuss the same issues. Again and again we propose and try the same or similar solutions. But whatever we discuss and whatever we try, again and again we end up disappointed, our hopes for solid growth still unrealized. Consider for instance just four key initiatives undertaken during the last 15 years:

- ❑ acquiring a sanctuary of our own,
- ❑ calling an extension minister twice,
- ❑ building a special facility for children’s RE,
- ❑ employing first an office manager, then a children’s RE director, and finally a consulting minister

All these promising and apparently tried and true methods for growing a congregation never managed to move us to critical mass, to a membership large enough to support the many activities we expect in a vital, thriving congregation. Each one may well have benefited us in specific, demonstrable ways, but none of them singly or together provided the shortcut to growth that we’ve been looking for. Still, taken together, this 15 year history of key initiatives does appear to suggest one valuable lesson:

“If you do what you’ve always done,  
you’ll get what you’ve always got!”

Facilities and personnel, of course, are not the only important initiatives of the last 15 years, but they have loomed large and still do in our thinking. A newer or more centrally located facility or a more experienced or differently trained minister still appear high on the wish lists of many of our members no matter the lack of growth in the past that was hoped for either from bricks and mortar or professional staff.

Surely appropriate facilities and personnel have been and will remain important congregational goals. But if we read our history carefully, **the view that facilities and personnel, in and of themselves, will grow the congregation can and should be seriously questioned.** We have tried these approaches to growth and the growth we expected never materialized. Very likely the priority we have given these goals in the past needs to be shifted elsewhere.

### Our Key Religious Tasks

The goals and objectives that follow are premised on a different approach to growth. Our sense of the matter is that what most powerfully draws potential members into fellowship with us is the kind of intentional religious community we offer, the kind of community that can transform lives religiously.

What visitors on Sunday morning are looking to join is not just a debating society or social club or political caucus or therapy group or activist alliance or graduate seminar (all of which are readily available in other Harrisonburg venues). Instead, what they seek are new ways to address the key issues they face everyday:

- (1) new ways to make sense of their lives and the world around them,
- (2) new ways to experience the kinship of a common humanity, and
- (3) new ways to build a better world for themselves and their children.

Indeed, rather than any specific set of beliefs, it is these key tasks – sense-making, care-giving, and justice-seeking – that most fundamentally define religious community, both the community our visitors seek and the community that we at HUU have to offer. In fact the greatest accomplishment of our short fifteen-year history may well be the creation of just such a community: a community that truly challenges its members to discover and value their better selves in service and mutual support and to align their lives in the world differently as a result of that discovery.

True, some in our congregation may feel uncomfortable with words like “religious” or “spiritual” or “ministry” or “worship,” having jettisoned long ago the denominational or sectarian beliefs associated with such language. Indeed for some the use of words like these may even trigger difficult or painful memories. Nonetheless, religion defined simply as “the work of Beloved Community” is in fact what HUU has been doing for the past 15 years, with sense-making, care-giving, and justice-seeking the key tasks of the congregation’s shared ministry. And if that has been our mission, and if the key tasks that comprise that mission are fundamentally religious tasks, should we not state candidly and honestly, without ambivalence or apology, that religion is fundamentally what we are about?

However diversely motivated we are by ideology or theology (whether as theists or atheists or pagans or humanists), as a congregation we need to affirm as explicitly, as emphatically, and as often as we can that

- **the key religious tasks we share are what define us as a community, and**
- **it is precisely the religious character of the work we do in community which will ultimately attract the new members we look to have in the future .**

## Building From Strength

Though we have tried repeatedly to integrate professional ministry into our congregational life (with varying levels of success each time), the committee is not at all sure that the typical minister-centered model of church organization that seems to predominate in most other and especially larger UU churches is either appropriate or even possible at present here at HUU.

- ❑ The current economics of professional ministry (driven in large part by the astoundingly high cost of seminary training) makes full-time or even part-time ministry settlements in congregations below 125 members a virtual impossibility.
- ❑ In addition, the culture of lay leadership that has existed at HUU since its inception is also a factor. As we have learned in different ways with each of our extension and consulting ministers, the binary, minister-congregation model of church organization does not in fact fit well with the patterns of work and worship established at HUU over the last 15 years. Out of necessity lay leaders established these patterns, sharing as well as they could all the burdens of ministry and governance in order to assure the congregation's continued viability. But, if truth be told, ministers (whether UU or not) generally lack training or experience in adapting to pre-existing traditions of lay leadership. Collaboration does not often loom large in their courses of study or their resumes. At least as far as ministry is concerned, deference, decision-making authority, and no real accountability to elected lay leaders are what ministry professionals generally expect. The unhappy or mixed results of our repeated attempts to establish professional ministry at HUU may well be attributed to no other circumstance than this: the clash of two very different cultures, the minister-centered and the lay-centered.

Nonetheless, **one of the principal strengths of our religious community has actually been its long history of lay leadership** and the sharing of ministry burdens fostered by that leadership.

- ❑ A long history of year-round Sunday services, regular fellowship events, and organized social justice work (for the most part planned and executed by lay members) has been one of the most outstanding accomplishments of our 15 years of congregational life. The immense time, effort, expertise, commitment, and passion invested by our membership in the shared religious work of our community during its short 15 year history is both remarkable and inspiring. And though widely unacknowledged both within our community and outside it, that history of accomplishment is in fact an exceptionally good example of what the “shared ministry” concept really means.
- ❑ Nonetheless our district and denominational leaders in particular seem to assign little importance these days to lay leadership as part of an effective growth strategy. Often ministers themselves, these leaders usually prescribe (what a surprise!) “calling a minister” as the best option they know of for growing small congregations. And though these same leaders have indeed begun to use the phrase “shared ministry” more and more frequently (especially with regard to small group and covenant group ministries), their general silence about ministry professionals sharing traditional ministry tasks with lay leaders in real collaborative teams is almost deafening. Could clergy professionals in some way feel threatened by the notion that effective ministry can be done and actually has been for years and years by lay leaders without either specialized training or seminary credentials? Certainly the UUA has invested little interest or energy in developing intermediate options on the ministry continuum between the two extremes of traditional, minister-centered ministry and the shared ministry of lay-led, covenant groups.

In contrast, we believe that **the most promising ministry alternative for small congregations may well be a ministry team** (a team initially composed of part-time lay ministers and eventually broadened and strengthened through the addition of part-time seminary-trained professionals).

- ❑ Because small congregations have had to rely on their lay leaders for ministry as well as governance, those leaders are the natural nucleus for future ministry specialization in the small congregation. They know the congregants well. They have served in multiple roles over the years, for instance as worship leaders, committee chairs, or project volunteers. They know how to collaborate with the congregation's elected decision-makers since they may well have served as board members themselves. And they may already be well versed in the art of balancing part-time ministry responsibilities with part-time or even full-time for-profit employment.
- ❑ In addition, the creation of a ministry team will provide the congregation and especially its governing board with an important learning experience, the opportunity to address key issues implicit in any future ministry call. Generally young congregations have little if any experience with such matters as accountability procedures, role expectations, and conduct standards as far as ministers are concerned. And often such congregations have too little time and energy to cope with the implications of these issues in gradual and manageable steps before having to negotiate binding covenants and contracts with ministry professionals.
- ❑ In the long run, we believe that developing a ministry team will provide a small, young congregation with "on-the-job" training, the practical experience needed to become a suitable partner for a ministry professional in a half-time or full-time settlement when the congregation has grown large enough to appropriately support one.

### Being Human Religiously

James Luther Adams tellingly described the essence of liberal religion as learning how to be human religiously. **The key to our future may well be just that: learning how to affirm the profoundly religious character of the work we do in seeking justice, caring for our close and extended human families, and making sense of the world around us.** Throughout our first 15 years we have been doing this work consistently and well. Now is the time to affirm the fundamentally religious character of this work and to trust that from that affirmation will come the future we look to have and the growth that will make that future possible.

## The Work of Beloved Community

| <b>Key Religious Tasks</b>   |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <p><b><u>Sense-Making</u></b></p> <p>(making sense of the world out of our own lived experience)</p> <p><i>Sunday Services Committee</i></p> | <p><b><u>Care-Giving</u></b></p> <p>(caring for people whose life journeys we share)</p> <p><i>Caring Circle</i></p> | <p><b><u>Justice-Seeking</u></b></p> <p>(building a better world for future generations)</p> <p><i>Social Justice Committee</i></p> |
| <b>Ministries</b>  |  |   |
| <p>Adult RE</p> <p>Children's RE</p> <p>Choir</p>  | <p>House Church</p> <p>HUU Newsletter</p> <p>HUU Web Site</p>  | <p>JMU Campus Ministry</p> <p>Knitting Guild</p> <p>Weekly Sunday Worship</p>   |
| <b>Key Institutional Tasks</b>   |  |   |
| <p><b><u>Leadership</u></b></p> <p><i>Board of Trustees</i></p>  | <p><b><u>Membership</u></b></p> <p><i>Membership Committee</i></p>   | <p><b><u>Stewardship</u></b></p> <p><i>Finance Committee</i><br/><i>Buildings/Grounds Committee</i></p>                             |

**HUU Strategic Planning Committee  
Key Goals and Proposals  
October 16, 2005**

*L = Long-Term (More than Four Years)  
M = Mid-Term (One to Four Years)  
S = Short Term (Under One Year)*

|          |  |                 |
|----------|--|-----------------|
| <b>1</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>understand the nature of our intentional community in new ways</b>                               |                 |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ emphasize the key role of our religious focus</li> </ul>                            | <i><b>L</b></i> |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ deepen our moral and spiritual connections with each other</li> </ul>               | <i><b>L</b></i> |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ help individuals and small groups develop satisfying spiritual practices</li> </ul> | <i><b>S</b></i> |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ create explicit covenants for membership and right relations</li> </ul>             | <i><b>S</b></i> |

|          |   |                   |
|----------|---|-------------------|
| <b>2</b> | <input type="checkbox"/> <b>learn to manage conflict religiously</b>  |                   |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ deepen our religious focus as a means of transcending disagreement and discord</li> </ul>  | <i><b>L</b></i>   |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ use the draft Covenant of Beloved Community (CBC) as a basis for exploring right relations issues in workshops, services, and actual decision-making situations</li> </ul>   | <i><b>S</b></i>   |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ invite congregation members and work groups to adopt the CBC individually or collectively as both a valid spiritual practice and a practical tool for avoiding or managing conflict in the congregation</li> </ul> | <i><b>S-M</b></i> |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ use district and Community Mediation Center resources to educate the congregation about healthy decision-making and conflict management strategies</li> </ul>  | <i><b>S-M</b></i> |

|          |  |            |
|----------|--|------------|
| <b>3</b> | <b>□ foster long-term growth in membership</b>   |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ emphasize message and mission (our key religious tasks) at every worship service:</li> </ul>  | <b>S-L</b> |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; sense-making (making sense of the world out of our own lived experience)</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; care-giving (caring for people whose life journeys we share)</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; justice-seeking (building a better world for future generations)</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ recognize weekly Sunday worship as the central activity of both our common life as a religious community and of our outreach to the larger Harrisonburg community</li> </ul>  | <b>S-L</b> |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; ensure quality worship and music every Sunday morning (train/mentor lay presenters, identify readily available service resources, encourage collaboration in service development and presentation, reserve one service each month for presentation by a key committee, ministry, or task group)</li> </ul> |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; enhance the sacred character of the space we use for worship (build a vestibule; showcase banners, religious art, or spiritual practice materials; keep materials unrelated to worship outside the sanctuary)</li> </ul>   |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; reduce the use of worship time for performance of non-religious, institutional tasks (announcements, reminders, sign-ups)</li> </ul>   |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ make membership expectations explicit and challenging</li> </ul>  | <b>S</b>   |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; for our key religious tasks (sense-making, care-giving, justice-seeking)</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; for our key institutional tasks (leadership, membership, stewardship)</li> </ul>   |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ develop a New UU Membership Path</li> </ul>   | <b>S</b>   |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; detailing specific steps in the HUU joining process</li> </ul>   |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; outlining specific mentoring opportunities in covenant groups/house churches</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ base plans for growth in membership primarily on our own history and experience as a religious community</li> </ul>   | <b>M</b>   |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; identify what hasn't worked well (what repels visitors)</li> </ul>   |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; identify what has worked well (what attracts visitors)</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ target demographic groups particularly open to our message and mission for specific ministry outreach and membership service efforts</li> </ul>   | <b>M</b>   |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; new UU covenant groups</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; young adult ministry</li> </ul>  |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; JMU campus ministry</li> </ul>   |            |
|          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Welcoming Community/GLBT/Interweave ministry</li> </ul>  |            |

|          |  |           |
|----------|--|-----------|
| <b>4</b> | <b>□ share ministry roles and responsibilities broadly and effectively</b>   |           |
|          | ▪ establish community expectations for a Ministry Team   | <i>SI</i> |
|          | > expectations for personal and professional conduct   |           |
|          | > expectations for collaboration and mutual support  |           |
|          | > expectations for accountability to the board and congregation  |           |
|          | ▪ identify specific Ministry Team responsibilities   | <i>S2</i> |
|          | > for worship (one worship service jointly conducted each month)   |           |
|          | > for member contact (monthly “caseload” of 1/3 <sup>rd</sup> or 1/4 <sup>th</sup> of membership)  |           |
|          | > for covenant group formation/leadership (one covenant group per associate)   |           |
|          | ▪ communicate general Ministry Team goals  | <i>S3</i> |
|          | > giving real life to the concept of Shared Ministry   |           |
|          | > discovering new ways to deliver specific ministry services   |           |
|          | > bridging the divide between current lay leadership and future professional leadership at HUU   |           |
|          | > building on the key strength of small, lay-led congregations, the interests and talents of its most committed members  |           |
|          | ▪ establish a Ministry Team to provide the congregation with key ministry services   | <i>S4</i> |
|          | > three/four lay ministry associates (part-time, compensated staff) to be identified and commissioned by the board <u>as soon as possible</u>                    |           |
|          | > one or more professional ministry associates (part time, compensated staff) to be identified and commissioned by the board if possible <u>within two years</u> |           |

|          |   |          |
|----------|---|----------|
| <b>5</b> | <b>□ continue to manage community resources responsibly</b>   |          |
|          | ▪ premise future investment decisions on current availability of resources (avoid all “rosy scenario” planning approaches)  | <i>L</i> |
|          | ▪ pay off the RE Building loan in two years   | <i>S</i> |
|          | ▪ pay off the Sanctuary mortgage in four years  | <i>M</i> |
|          | ▪ increasingly make programs/ministries our chief investment priority as debt diminishes or new monies become available in the future   | <i>M</i> |
|          | ▪ build a membership base large enough (100-125 members) to support appropriate compensation and benefits before engaging trained ministry professionals on a permanent part-time or full-time basis                              | <i>M</i> |
|          | ▪ begin in-depth research of facilities needs and options but take no action on plans until after pay off of current loan and mortgage obligations (use the next four years for careful analysis of community development trends) | <i>M</i> |

|          |  |          |
|----------|--|----------|
| <b>6</b> | <b>□ reconfigure committees to reflect more clearly our congregation’s key institutional tasks and key religious tasks</b> |          |
|          | ▪ reduce the total number of committees by merging those with related functions  | <i>M</i> |
|          | ▪ whenever possible match each key task (whether religious or institutional) with one committee only                       | <i>M</i> |
|          | ▪ whenever possible replace committees with task groups  | <i>M</i> |