

## **Chapter 2: Creating an Internal Communications Plan**

### **OUTLINE OF STEPS COVERED IN CHAPTER TWO:**

#### **1. Confer with Congregational Leaders**

- Meet with board and minister about inventory findings
- Request a charge from the board to develop and present a draft plan
- Solicit information from committees and interest groups
- Determine budgetary and other resources

#### **2. Draft an Internal Communications Plan**

- Select and prioritize internal projects
- Allocate your budget
- Assign roles
- Create a planning calendar
- Coordinate internal publications and messages

#### **3. Garner Support for Your Plan**

- Present your plan to board and minister(s)
- Communicate approved plan to congregation

Now that your communications team has inventoried and evaluated your congregation's communications practices, it is time to use your findings to develop an internal communications plan. The process described below will be appropriate for most communications committees, although it may need to be simplified for smaller congregations. These practical steps may also be helpful when developing and executing your external communication projects. These projects will be discussed in terms of their public witness potential, and are covered in chapters 4 and 5. In those sections, strategic

planning is emphasized, but practical planning of the sort described below is necessary well. Therefore, it might be helpful to refer back to the outline at the start of this chapter when you are coordinating your public witness projects.

In theory, internal communications work is the innermost ring that needs to be in place before external work can widen that circle to encompass a broader audience. The reality, however, is that most congregations will be doing both kinds of communications work simultaneously. Exceptions might include small to midsize congregations that initially can manage only basic internal projects. But, as will be seen in later chapters, even very small congregations can have tremendous success in public witness work. In fact, coordination and intentionality are far more important than size. So please use the steps outlined in this chapter in whatever way helps your communications committee achieve its fullest potential.

## **1. Confer with Congregational Leaders**

- **Meet with board and minister about inventory findings**

After your communications team has agreed on priorities and drafted a brief list of preliminary goals, you will need to meet with congregational leaders to present your findings and receive a charge to develop and submit a detailed communications plan. It may seem like this creates unnecessary red tape, but this step is crucial if the team is to have the support of the leadership. All too often, a special task force or a new committee makes grand plans that get left on a side track without ever connecting with or influencing the main work of the congregation. The risk for this is even higher with intentional communications work, which is often considered as an afterthought -- when it is considered at all.

If you are building a new communications team or reviving a defunct one, your challenge is to make sure that the team's work begins and remains on the main track, so that communications goals become integral to congregation's mission. Volunteer work often proceeds by habit or inertia. How often we hear the familiar protest, "But we've always done it *this* way!" or its equivalent, "We've never done it *that* way!" In order to re-train your board and membership to think strategically about communications, the

team must be very explicit about seeking “buy-in” from the leadership and congregation. You simply can’t do this kind of work outside the current organizational system.

Your first presentation to the board should be a very clear and concise explication of your findings, including the following items from the list from the end of Chapter 1:

- What’s working?
- What needs work?
- Recommendations for high priority projects
- Preliminary estimate of necessary funds and other resources (including volunteer assistance)
- A communications mission statement to guide your team and inspire the congregation.

- **Request a charge from the board**

After the communications team has given its presentation and responded to questions, someone will need to ask for a formal charge from the board to empower the committee to develop a detailed communications plan for the congregation. It would be smart to arrange in advance for a board member or minister to make a formal motion at this point. Be sure that the charge includes clear expectations and specific deadlines, and that all parties understand just how much authority is being granted to the communications team. It’s likely that the team will already have a general idea of how their final proposal will look, but try to keep an open mind about the details. Now that your mission is going public, you will gather valuable information that could (and should) influence your plan.

- **Solicit information from committees and interest groups**

Once you have your charge, contact the different ministries and programs in the congregation to find out about significant projects and events that they have scheduled for the church year. Major events will form the basis for your planning calendar. It is

also possible (and certainly desirable) for the team eventually to provide tactful guidance on the timing of certain events, based on your assessment of their potential to attract visitors and/or media coverage.

The second crucial bit of information that you need from program committees is about how they have been communicating their projects to the congregation at large, and whether these methods have been effective. Some groups may be very well-organized and vocal, while others may function more like private clubs. Use the feedback from the successful groups to streamline your communications channels by combining or building on the most effective ones.

If your congregation has a church council, it would be ideal for the communications team to have a representative who attends regularly. If possible, choose a summer or early fall council meeting to initiate the conversation about your communications efforts. And keep in mind that most of the actual information-gathering will likely occur outside of those meetings, in small groups, via email discussions, or in one-to-one interviews.

- **Determine your budget and other resources**

Many congregations have small communications budgets, or no funding at all. While most congregations have earmarked money for the newsletter and for mailings to congregants, it is very common for UU churches to have less than \$2,000 per year in a budget line for “outreach,” or “public relations.” Large congregations usually, but not always, have a bit more to spend. This makes it even more important to plan carefully and use existing resources, programs, and materials creatively. Some larger congregations may be able to assign part of a staffer’s or intern’s portfolio to communications work. Others may be able to court a generous donor for a restricted gift to go toward public relations efforts. Or you could get really creative and host a special internal fund-raising event to bring in money, increase awareness about your work, and showcase your skills all at the same time.

The most common scenario, though, is for churches to do as much as they can with the little they've got. And that means relying heavily on volunteer talent and time. Planning is crucial.

## **2. Draft an Internal Communications Plan**

- **Select and prioritize internal projects**

Your plan needs to pass muster with the board and staff, so make sure that you choose projects that are the most essential and that can actually be accomplished. Don't try to do everything this year. Instead, focus your energy on projects that will endure and that can support other future projects. For most communities, the two most important links for all forms of communication are the newsletter and website. If one or both of these are not functioning, STOP. These must be in good shape before any of your other communications efforts can succeed.

- **Allocate your budget**

Estimate the cost of your most crucial projects and determine how best to use your financial resources. If you think that your goals are impossible without additional funds, then begin drafting a proposal to take to the board and finance committee. You may not get what you request immediately, but it's important to raise awareness of these needs and to start an ongoing conversation about investing in communications. Some expenses will be one-time outlays, such as for an initial website design, while others will be ongoing, like an annual ad in the yellow pages, or higher printing costs for an expanded newsletter. Be sure to demonstrate the financial value of the many services and resources that you will be receiving from volunteers without charge, and highlight the rewards that the congregation will reap once communications practices have improved.

- **Assign clear roles**

Make sure that everyone on the team has a clear role that matches their skills and personal schedules. The most demanding role will be the chair or coordinator, followed by the newsletter editor and webmaster. Some roles will be called upon infrequently, but with demands that are extremely time-sensitive, such as media contact person. Other tasks might be shared, such as copy editing and graphic design, provided that you can find skilled individuals for these tasks. If you are just starting to build a communications plan, then initially the team's roles will be project-based. Volunteers will need to build or update the website, coordinate the planning calendar, and revise the church brochure, among other important projects.

- **Draft a planning calendar**

This project is essential. When a committee only meets monthly (at the most) many opportunities will be missed unless they are scheduled in advance and tracked conscientiously. Your calendar should include all annual congregational events, such as child-dedication ceremonies, important anniversaries, special benefit events and fundraisers, and unique services such as a Blessing of the Animals or Flower Communion. You will also need to pencil in significant local events (municipal elections, Founders' Day, etc.), as well as regional and national holidays and major interfaith observances.

If you can begin to plan your programming to coincide with the external community and media calendars, you will create opportunities for media attention. For example, a Hindu-themed public worship service on or near Divali provides a great local hook for a newspaper story. Doing something unusual is also a plus. Your beautiful Yule solstice circle will attract spiritual seekers as well as the press, who are sick and tired of writing about Santa Claus coming to the mall. But reporters can only cover an event if they find out about it in time. So it's up to you to be thinking ahead and communicating in advance.

- **Coordinate internal print publications and other messages**

It's important make sure that your publications are all saying the same thing. During the inventory you probably noticed that several items were out-of-date, or that different slogans and logos were used on the website and the newsletter. One church in Massachusetts had re-used the same brochure each year for canvass, listing as a fund-raising goal "to call a full-time DRE." By the time someone discovered that the brochure was out-of-date, they had actually hired a DRE three years earlier! But no one had bothered to update the old brochure or remove it from the pew racks, so it became a source of misinformation and confusion for visitors and members alike. Some housecleaning may be in order in your congregation, but be sure to archive a few copies of all print materials before discarding the rest and include in your plan clear recommendations for updating important materials.

In addition to getting the basic information corrected and aligned, think about ways to lend message consistency and graphic continuity to your materials. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Coordinate your signs, website, brochures, newsletters, staff business cards, etc. to reflect your central message. This includes choosing a specific font type and a slogan, which might be your mission statement or another short message. In corporate-speak, this is what's known as "branding" for your congregation.
- Don't underestimate the power of simple, bold visuals, with a standardized logo and colors. These visual cues will help to establish your congregation as a familiar institution within your local community. For both of these efforts you will need to get input from others in the congregation, and it may involve a somewhat lengthy process, but try to take some first steps and make this an ongoing priority.

### **3. Garner Support for Your Plan**

- **Present your plan to the board and minister(s)**

Return to the board with a completed plan. It's probably wise to submit the plan in advance of the meeting so that members have a chance to read it thoroughly. The aim is to have official approval and support before going forward, so consider this step a diplomatic, rather than an adversarial, opportunity. And be sure to include all deadlines and cost estimates in your plan. Hopefully, all of the necessary discussions and negotiations will have taken place in the information-gathering and drafting stages, enabling the plan to be accepted without too much wrangling at the meeting. If your team is requested to revise and resubmit the plan, try to oblige cheerfully and quickly.

- **Communicate the approved plan to the congregation**

Find creative ways, other than the minutes of the board meeting, to share your plan with the congregation. You want their support and enthusiasm, and it will help your efforts if they learn about your objectives early in the process. At the very minimum, the team should write a detailed newsletter article. You might also ask a minister to mention the plan during the announcement portion of the Sunday service, or have your team volunteer to lead a creative participatory worship service around the theme of "communication" to inspire the congregation. Another of your goals is to enlist volunteer help, so a table during coffee hour might be a good way to get the word out. Post a copy of the final plan on a bulletin board or in the members-only section of your website.

Promoting your plan is only small part of your overall objective. But it is a necessary first step if you are to build good-will, inspire the congregation, and develop a solid inner ring on which to base your subsequent public relations projects.

***Note:** For additional information, including detailed practical tips for executing the suggestions in this chapter, please see **Appendix 1, Internal Communications Resources** at the back of this manual.*