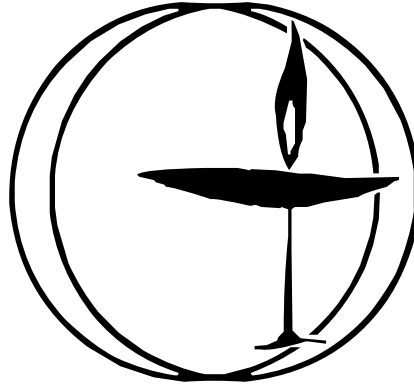


Breakthrough Congregation Discussion Guide 2005



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This Discussion Guide highlights the topics of importance in the presentations by the four congregations chosen as Breakthrough Congregations by the Unitarian Universalist Association. Further, the Discussion Guide provides questions aimed at stimulating discussion among your members. A Breakthrough Congregation is one that exhibits many of the following attributes:

- Excellence in worship
- A strong family ministry
- Radically hospitable
- Growth in membership and has navigated a size transition
- Fair share with UUA and the district

Each of the four congregations featured on this DVD has shown that they can achieve significant growth and vitality through hard work, collaboration, and a willingness to take a leap of faith to achieve goals. As you watch these presentations, ask yourself these questions:

1. What is similar about my congregation?
2. What are the common themes that emerge from these congregations?
3. What are the challenges that we face in being able to break through in our growth?
4. What are the opportunities before us and how can we capitalize on them?
5. Where do we start and who can help us?

Quimper Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Port Townsend, Washington

OVERVIEW

- Quimper made a firm commitment to grow. A major factor in their success, according to Rev. Bruce Bode, was the “Fellowship’s commitment to putting resources into their Religious Education program and the quality and character of its RE director.” The congregation has grown from 54 members in 1994 to 213 members in 2004.
- This congregation made a commitment to build its own building. With the new building, the membership doubled in one year. How did they do it? They used lots of congregational involvement to make key decisions. They also developed the ability to “listen to each other with love and respect.” This process of deep listening combined with consensus building proved to be a strong bonding experience.
- A portion of the presentation showed a thriving diverse community. The congregation made three purposeful decisions to create their beloved community:

- they made room for new people to bring their talents and gifts into the congregation. As a member stated, “People go out of their way to make new people feel welcome;” and,
 - they provided opportunities for members to gather for fun and support; and,
 - they made the commitment to become a Welcoming Congregation.
- Members admit that growth in numbers and in diversity were not without problems. Nevertheless, the congregation feels they have looked at these mistakes, learned from them, and have moved on.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your congregation’s commitment to building a quality RE program?

- a. Is the congregation adequately supporting the program with funds for curricula, materials, and space?
- b. Is it adequately supporting the RE professional in meeting the suggested compensation and benefits for the position?
- c. Is money provided for continuing education conferences to enhance the professional’s skills?
- d. Is there a fully functioning RE committee to assist the RE professional in building the program?

2. What steps has your congregation taken toward building a strong shared sense of mission?

- a. How do you work through disagreements so that people can feel good about the process?
- b. Is there an active recruiting process for identifying new emerging leaders in the congregation?

3. In what ways does your congregation create a deep community experience for one another?

4. In what ways is your congregation welcoming?

- a. Is there a process for connecting new people in the life of the church?
- b. Are there opportunities for new people to receive training in leadership roles?
- c. Do experienced leaders know when to step aside to make room for others?

First Unitarian Church of Dallas, Texas

OVERVIEW

- This congregation became a breakthrough congregation, according to its members, as a result of strong ministerial and lay leadership. One of the ministers, Rev. Dr. Laurel Hallman, described the congregation as, “strong, sophisticated, and well organized.”
- Karen Lewis, the DRE, attributed the congregation’s dedication to social justice ministries as a factor in their breakthrough. First Unitarian promoted coalitions of interfaith groups to address community problems like desegregation and fair housing.
- A major ministry at the church was helping people explore and expand their spiritual beliefs and practices. The congregation openly embraced the use of religious language. Religious language, said the Reverend Daniel Kanter, led individuals to “get a deeper sense of themselves, their relation to their community, and to God.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are the minister and the lay leaders supportive of each other?

- a. How well does your leadership function to meet the expectations of the members?
- b. Is input from the congregation solicited?

3. What are the ways that your congregation engages in a social justice ministry?

- a. Who do you define as ‘your neighbors’ and how do you relate with them in tackling community issues?

4. Are you intentional in channeling resources to ministries that provide spiritual growth and depth?

- a. Does your congregation embrace religious language as a means to connect you to others?
- b. Are there opportunities for people of all ages to engage with the deeper spiritual questions?
- c. What are the relational ministries for people of all ages that deepen connections?

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church, Mahtomedi, MN

OVERVIEW

- The presentation began by showing the congregation enjoying a variety of communal activities, including the sharing of meals. A spokesperson for White Bear, Janet Urbanowitz, shared that members have a warm feeling for one another and genuinely enjoyed the company of each other.
- Jon Bloomberg showed a time line of the church's history segmented into sections that correspond to significant decisions and commitments that Bloomberg attributed to the growth in membership of 100% in five years. These commitments included the following:
 - acting intentionally welcoming and open to newcomers; and,
 - integrating new members into the life of the community; and,
 - a significant monetary commitment of its members.

The financial commitment of its members allowed White Bear to staff for growth. Financial support also allowed the congregation to create dynamic programs for children and youth.

- According to DRE Janet Hanson, the congregation engaged in a visioning process to define its core values. These core values provided the basis for White Bear's Social justice initiatives. Social justice played a prominent role in the life of the congregation. For example, members and youth were active in opposing the invasion of Iraq, and, the minister spoke out against prohibiting gay marriage in the state.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does your congregation socialize as a community?

- a. How do you express the creativity and humor that is a natural part of being with one another?
- b. How does the serving of food enhance the feeling of friendship and community in your congregation?
- c. In what other ways are you radically hospitable to the stranger and each other?

2. What are the trends over the past ten to fifteen years in your congregation? What do they show you?

- a. What are the strategic decisions that you can make in staffing and programming that will result in increasing attendance and membership?
- b. Is your space adequate to sustain increased membership and programming?

c. Are you staffed for growth or for maintenance?

3. What are the core values of your congregation?

a. What processes do you use to determine what these are?

b. Do these core values guide the congregation in its vision and mission?

c. Does your congregation have a broad commitment to human rights?

d. What are the ways that you involve people of all ages in doing social justice work?

e. Has social action been a point of controversy in the past or in the present? If so, how do you deal with these conflicts?

All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, DC

OVERVIEW

- Mark Hicks spoke of the Men’s Covenant group in which he was a member. As a gay black man, he felt that this group provided him with a safe space that transcended the boundaries that normally divide people. He stated that the promise of Unitarian Universalism was creating a place where people can struggle and challenge and be present to one another as they create a future where diversity is a source of joy and wholeness.
- Worship was a critical component of the success of All Souls Unitarian. They had a dynamic worship service that included a variety of music, inspiring preaching, and a communal prayer of “Spirit of Life”.
- All Souls Associate Minister Shana Goodwin spoke about the ministries of connection and the importance of engagement, which successfully led to the growth in the congregation. She felt that people who weren’t involved in the life of the congregation in some significant way did not stay long.
- Past President Meredith Higgins-Hargrave told of the transformation the congregation went through after the untimely departure of a minister:
 - the church learned to ask for help when they needed it from the UUA, the District, and others; and,
 - the congregation changed the way they interacted and how they governed themselves; and,
 - members learned how to better listen to one another and how to have fun; and,
 - they shared their dreams for the congregation; and,
 - they embraced a new partnership in shared ministry between paid staff and volunteers.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1. What is your congregation doing to attract new members that better reflect the diversity within your community?**
 - a. What are the groups within your congregation that provide a safe place for struggle and challenge?
 - b. What are the ways your congregation is creating opportunities to transcend boundaries?
- 2. In what ways does your worship offer spiritual sustenance for your engagement with the world?**
 - a. Does your worship service provide music that reflect a diversity of musical styles?
 - b. What are the features in your worship that deepen the spiritual connections?
- 3. How does your congregation build a community that sustains and enriches the lives of all?**
 - a. What are the ways that your congregation creates opportunities for members to connect to each other, their spirits, and to the Holy?
 - b. What are the organized groups in your congregation that are for having fun?
- 4. Who have you turned to for help when your congregation has been stuck in some way?**
 - a. In what ways have you utilized the services that your district can provide?
 - b. When was the last time that you had a congregational process for listening to one another and your dreams for the future?
- 5. In which ways are you sharing the ministry among you and the professional staff that is in partnership with you?**

Conclusion

These stories of congregations show that any size congregation can overcome obstacles, plan for growth and manage change. Just like them, your congregation can grow in members and in spirit. With intentional focus your congregation will achieve its own breakthrough in attracting visitors, turning visitors into members, retaining members, and, developing leadership. Call your District Office for support and resources in all of these areas.

For more information on the featured congregations read the articles about them in the publication *Interconnections*

<http://www.uua.org/interconnections/membership/vol8-4a-membership.html>