



# Strategic Plan

for the

## First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

### Introduction

In May, 2008, the Board of Trustees appointed a strategic planning committee to help FUUSA explore the dreams and possibilities of what our congregation could be and to make recommendations for our future. Once convened, our committee selected Dream Catchers as our name. According to Native American tradition, a dream catcher will filter your dreams, allowing only good dreams to pass through.

We sought to engage as many members of our congregation as possible in the planning process.

- In the fall of 2008, we gathered with about 90 FUUSAns in a series of “Dream Catcher Circles” that we hoped would help people think deeply about their experience with FUUSA and their dreams for the future.
- In the early part of 2009, we organized three discussions to further explore the themes that we had heard.
- We shared our drafts of goals at the annual meeting in May and collected suggestions from the congregation.
- And in June 2009, members of the Board of Trustees and Program Coordinating Council reviewed and commented on our draft goals and advised on implementation steps.

### FUUSA Strategic Plan

Our congregation talked about our dreams in numerous meetings and gatherings over a period of nine months. We shared laughter and tears, recalling times that demonstrated how important our religious community has been in our lives. We described our longing for stronger connections, deeper meaning and greater impact. We compared our personal philosophies as free thinkers who find common ground in the principles and values of Unitarian Universalism.

Loving what we have, we seek more. Together, we believe we can make more of a difference in the lives of our members, our congregation, and our larger community.

Our plan identifies goals and objectives that are focused in four areas:

- Community and connection
- Theological and philosophical diversity
- Social justice
- Beacon of liberal religion

In addition, we recommend that the Board of Trustees consider changes in our organizational structure, staffing and governance which can help us to achieve these goals and objectives.

### Community and Connection

Overwhelmingly, we feel that community is one of

the greatest benefits and joys of being a member of FUUSA. On the other hand, we long for *more* community and a deepening of the experience of community. We understand this to mean that while there are strong affiliations within the community, the web is not yet fully connected.

We also long for help in and opportunities for reaching out to others across our differences. We struggle with the human tendency to compartmentalize people and to stay with “our own.” To resist that urge is the appropriate and essential work of a religious community such as ours.

We recognize that our community is not bounded by the walls of our church but extends into the neighborhood around us. To these ends, we have framed the following goals.

### **Community and Connection Goals and Objectives**

To broaden and deepen connections within the FUUSA community, within and across generations.

- Continue and enhance our affinity groups and small group ministry.
- Evaluate and strengthen our institutional structure that supports social and community-building events.
- Offer diversity, anti-bias, and non-violent communication training opportunities, making these practices part of our congregational culture.
- Increase the number of affordable social events that we offer.
- Use community-building strategies to make social risk taking less difficult.

To foster a congregational culture of service, where members are encouraged and supported in contributing their “time, talent and treasure” to the work of the community.

- Use new technologies where appropriate to enhance people’s opportunity to connect and get involved.
- Improve methods of “getting the word out” so that people are better able to make decisions about what they can do to participate and support the work of FUUSA.

To increase our understanding of and commitment to ways to be in sensitive, compassionate, and productive community with our neighborhood.

- Work with neighborhood groups in finding ways that FUUSA can be of help and increase our involvement with the Washington Square Neighborhood Association.

### **Theological and Philosophical Diversity**

Unitarian Universalism is a “big tent” religion. In our principles and purposes we covenant to affirm and promote both “*Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*” and “*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.*” FUUSA is the religious home of self-identified humanists and theists, atheists and Christians, agnostics and pagans and others who resist all labels; and yet across the board we heard a longing to explore, deepen and share one’s personal journey and search for meaning.

More specifically, from a variety of individual responses and group discussions we heard the following major themes: (1) the desire to deepen spiritual and philosophical inquiry and explore personal spiritual practices; (2) the desire for a safe environment in which to share one’s own faith journey without fear of judgment or criticism; (3) a hunger for Sunday morning worship services that touch the mind, heart and soul; and (4) the need for faith development opportunities beyond Sunday services.

We were gratified by the openness, honesty and sincerity of participants in these discussions; we know the issues are often deeply felt, pose difficult questions, and have no easy answers. Yet we firmly believe that telling our stories and hearing from each other in community will lead to greater understanding and acceptance--thereby enriching us all.

### **Theological and Philosophical Diversity Goals and Objectives**

To provide positive opportunities for FUUSAns to explore, share and deepen their beliefs, values and personal search for meaning.

- Provide opportunities for people to share their journeys and beliefs both in small groups and with the congregation at large.
- Provide opportunities for and encourage study, reflection and deepening of spiritual, philosophical and theological beliefs and practices.
- Celebrate the diversity of beliefs and practices within our congregation, honoring the varieties in language and expression.

To offer worship services that are a source of challenge, inspiration and joy, feeding our souls, filling our hearts, enriching our minds, and equipping us to live out our Unitarian Universalist values.

- Enhance artistic expression and experiential opportunities in our Sunday services and other worship experiences.

## Social Justice

As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the principle of justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and we take pride in our congregation's social action over the years. This action has included offering a summer program for neighborhood children, supporting same sex marriage, helping to build two Habitat for Humanity houses, providing refugee assistance, supporting community empowerment through ARISE, becoming a Green Sanctuary, advocating for social justice at the state level through Interfaith Impact, becoming a Welcoming Congregation, providing a location for community forums in Emerson, and supporting prisoners and their families.

In group and individual discussions, we heard a widespread and heartfelt commitment to social justice. Quoting a well-loved UU hymn, we seek "to give life the shape of justice." At the same time, we heard from social justice leaders and organizers in our congregation about the challenges of finding volunteers and financial resources.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we feel that we are called to commit to significant and meaningful social justice work in our larger community. As individuals, we are looking for opportunities in our busy lives to "make a difference" through direct service as well as advocacy for change.

Our social justice work is rooted in our spiritual and philosophical values. It helps connect us as a community and strengthens our UU identity. We must find new ways to weave social justice into the fabric of our congregation, while honoring and building on FUUSA's tradition of social action. We believe that by increasing and focusing congregational energy, we will make a greater impact on our community and our own lives.

### Social Justice Goal and Objectives

To focus our efforts and increase the engagement of our members in social justice.

- Assess the process to select, introduce and in-

tegrate new social justice projects into congregational life and the ways that staff, Board, councils and committees support that process.

- Increase the impact of our efforts and engage and energize the members of the congregation by concentrating our efforts in the following three areas:
  1. Making a difference in the lives of children and families in the city of Albany
  2. Becoming a leader in sustainable environmental practices
  3. Advocating for public policies that are in line with our UU values and principles.
- Explore new and proven methods for increasing congregational support and involvement in social justice initiatives.
- Inform and connect new members with social justice projects.
- Integrate social justice into the Sunday worship service and religious education.
- Assess the need for ongoing staff support for social justice.
- Increase communication and coordination among minister, staff, lay leaders and members/volunteers.

## A Beacon of Liberal Religion

There are many, many more people who would be attracted to being part of Unitarian Universalism if they knew who we are and what we value. As the younger generations have become less denominationally identified and more and more seek a liberal, inclusive religious approach, growth is quite likely in our congregations in the future. We believe that the membership in our congregations in the Capital Region could grow significantly if we are welcoming to newcomers and help start new congregations in places like Clifton Park. The success of our new congregation in Saratoga Springs should be very encouraging to us. We recognize from our research that this growth will be stifled if it isn't intentionally planned and widely supported.

The most important benefit of a larger membership will be to advance the mission of our congregation and Unitarian Universalism in the Capital Region.

### Beacon Goals and Objectives

To project our Unitarian Universalist identity into

the Capital Region so the vast majority of the residents know who we are and what we value, both in belief and action.

- Work through the Capital Region Unitarian Universalists of New York (CRUUNY) on joint marketing projects and exploring the possibility of new and/or satellite congregations.
- Develop our own marketing methods and techniques to reach UU's in the region served by our congregation.
- Help FUUSAns develop deep knowledge of the history and values of Unitarian Universalism, as well as an ability to articulate those values, thereby sharing our transformative message, by offering educational opportunities on UU history, heritage and values.

To increase our readiness and capacity to be a religious home to serve all those in our geographic region who wish to be part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

- Provide programming that is accessible and attractive to diverse members and visitors.
- Integrate anti-racism, anti-oppression and multi-cultural work to address institutional and personal barriers to acceptance and inclusion.
- Dedicate volunteer, budget and staff resources to facilitate and increase our success in attracting visitors, welcoming new members and retaining current members.

## Next Steps

To help achieve this plan, we recommend that the Board of Trustees continue its efforts to strengthen stewardship, utilize fully the resources of the St. Lawrence District and the Unitarian Universalist Association, and review FUUSA's governance, staff and management structures that support our vision and mission.

Specifically, we recommend these next steps for the Board of Trustees:

- Create a new Community and Connections Committee that will take the lead in implementing programs and events to broaden and deepen the connections within our community and with our neighborhood.
- Beginning in 2010, review the strategic plan annually to identify and prioritize actions that can be taken on both a short-term and long-term basis to implement it.
- Review current staffing as well as identified needs for additional staff leadership and support in the areas of social justice, volunteer coordination, membership, and administration. Build recommendations into the congregational budget proposed for the 2010-2011 fiscal year.
- Appoint a Governance Task Force to review the governing and coordinating structures of our congregation and make proposals that would better help us achieve the goals and objectives in this strategic plan.
- Establish a Task Force to develop a Covenant of Right Relations that states how we intend to relate to each other within our religious community. The covenant should address tolerance and respect for different theological and philosophical views, resolving conflict in constructive ways, and striving to become an inclusive, anti-racist and anti-oppressive congregation.
- With other congregations in the Capital Region Unitarian Universalists of New York (CRUUNY), plan to offer the "Wellspring" program beginning in 2010. Wellspring is a nine-month long program designed to deepen participants' spiritual lives and connections with others through an intentional program of daily spiritual practice, spiritual direction (via work with a mentor), study and reflection, and small group meetings.
- Plan to bring in Reverend Dick Gilbert, social justice coordinator for the St. Lawrence District of the UUA, in the next year. Ask him to consult with us and/or lead a workshop to assist our congregation in focusing our efforts and increasing the engagement of our members in social justice.