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TO: Countryside Church UU
FROM: Michael Durall
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RE: Final report

I enjoy visiting Countryside, and appreciate the gracious hospitality of so many people there. I'm very grateful.

This is my final report to the congregation, and is intended for all members to read and comment upon. I hope the church will schedule a time for discussion of my recommendations. I always enjoy receiving feedback.

I. The greatest challenge

Countryside's greatest challenge is Unitarian Universalism's greatest challenge.

In my work with UU congregations nationwide, I can trace almost all problem areas directly to low or ambiguous expectations of membership. Church literature is replete with references that raising expectations of membership is the single best strategy for a church to grow in membership, health, and strength.

Yet from the denominational headquarters to the local congregation, attempting to raise expectations, except in rare instances, is the "third rail" of congregational life for UU leaders, not to be touched. For many decades, Unitarian Universalism has touted individual freedom and personal autonomy, instead of defining core values that unite us as people of faith.

Actually, I prefer not to use the word "expectations" when discussing membership. Rather, I believe the phrases, "Integrity of Membership," or, "Membership in Good Standing" are more uplifting and engaging. Integrity of Membership should include:

- Attending Sunday services regularly
- Participating in religion-based program that deepens your faith
- Being involved in one outreach or service project each year
- Reaching the 5-10 percent charitable giving level
- Telling others about the church

Some UUs believe these are modest expectations, a low rung on the ladder in comparison to many religions in America today. Others believe UUs could never be asked for so much. In my view, being in community on Sunday, deepening our spiritual lives, helping others, becoming generous people, and sharing the faith (the above items) are *REALLY GOOD, LIFE-AFFIRMING THINGS, NOT HEAVY BURDENS THAT PEOPLE MUST BEAR.*

I urge the leadership at Countryside to adopt the concept of Integrity of Membership.

II. Countryside's second challenge

As Countryside grows in size, the existing committee structure will become ever more problematic. Countryside now has some 30 to 35 committees, or about one committee for every nine members. The larger the number of committees, the more difficult church management becomes, and the greater the possibility for miscommunication. Also, the quality of committee work in any congregation is often inconsistent, and varies widely.

A growing number of churches are replacing the committee structure with ministry teams. The example to follow has three teams. Beyond the governing body and church finance, these three teams are:

- Inviting and welcoming ministries
- Faith formation and equipping ministries
- Sending and outreach ministries

Each of these teams would have two or three co-leaders, chosen by the members of that particular team. Using this team approach, the church's role is to bring people in, help them achieve spiritual maturity and greater courage, and send them out to create a more just and humane world. The rationale behind this model is that the "sending capacity" of a church is more important than the "seating capacity."

In many congregations, this is the journey on which they are embarked, a powerful metaphor. In fact, many effective churches begin their membership classes with the question, "Where are you on your spiritual journey now, and how can the church help you travel further down that path?"

III. A real-life example

Using the team model at Countryside, the Welcoming and Inviting Ministry Team would blend the current Public Relations, Communications, Ushers, Coffee Social Hour, Circle Suppers, Welcoming Congregation, and Membership committees into one larger team. (Anthony Robinson, an author and parish minister who recommends this approach, includes worship and music in the Welcoming and Inviting Ministry Team, but that's a judgment call.)

The board's "charge" or directive to this team might be to increase Countryside's visibility in the community, increase visitors by 25 percent, increase new members by 25 percent, implement the concept of Integrity of Membership, and define a sequential spiritual path for both old and new members. Another directive might to increase Sunday attendance to 75 percent of current members, up from the current 60 percent.

The board's message would also be, "You have extraordinarily capable people. Figure this out and keep us informed." The governing board has the legitimate authority to do this.

IV. Example #2

The second ministry team is Faith Formation and Equipping, which helps members discover a deeper spiritual life. At Countryside, this team might blend the current committees of Adult Faith Development, all Religious Education programs, covenant groups, and the Forum.

The board's directive to this team might include faith formation for all members, implementation of the spiritual journey model, helping church members always know what the next step in their spiritual journey will be, and providing for "graduate level" church that many people yearn for. Too many churches schedule a random assortment of programs and events, which have no connection or relationship to one another.

V. Example #3

The third ministry team is the Sending and Outreach Team. At Countryside, this would mean blending the current Social Action Committee, Volunteer Committee, Lay Ministry, and Caring Committee.

The board directive to this team would be to identify unmet needs in the community (already underway) and to create opportunities for members to participate. Of particular importance is to arrange at least one project each year in which children and youth work together with their parents or other adults in the congregation. The sending ministry is the best antidote to any congregation whose members are the only "end users" of everything the church creates.

VI. Structural teams

As noted above, the board would be responsible for administration, finance, and care of the property. A "structural" team might include the current Building Use Sub-committee, Aesthetics, Facilities and North Property, Green Sanctuary, and Grounds committees.

I realize I have left out a few committees; for example, the Choir Committee, the Wedding coordinator, and audio/visual. In the team model, there will always be some give and take, some flexibility.

But at the end of the day, I believe the team model is more effective, easier to manage, and of particular importance, encourages fuller involvement of new church members. A new church member who joins a long-standing committee often feels like an alien presence, and, regrettably, may be hesitant to bring up new ideas among a group of people who have known each other and worked together for a long time.

VII. Additional recommendations

In my work with congregations, I make judgment calls about the capacity of a particular congregation to implement the recommendations I make. Some recommendations are quite simple and can be implemented in the near short-term. Others are more complex and have farther-reaching implications. Below are a number of such recommendations.

The church sign

The exterior sign is difficult to see when coming from the south, and easy to drive by. This may seem to be a minor quibble, but the larger issue is that the current sign is a diminishing feature to Countryside. You've got an excellent location, with a great deal of visibility. A more attractive and prominent sign could draw the attention of many people passing by.

Also in terms of visibility, I'd suggest that on Sunday mornings when the weather is nice, members and their families not go into the building immediately, but linger outside before the service. This will give Countryside a welcoming persona to passersby.

The website

I'd suggest doing away with the Members Only section. If the membership directory is removed, the only other contents are routine forms, which can be placed elsewhere. The main purpose of the website is to attract visitors and newcomers, not create the perception of insiders and outsiders.

Publishing sermon titles in the newsletter

This is a hot button issue in many UU congregations. But I continue to believe that sermon titles published in advance creates a "pick and choose" faith, i.e., I like that sermon topic, so I'll be there, I don't like that one, so I'll stay home. What the fans of published sermon titles may not realize is how many potential visitors will decide NOT to attend.

I visit churches all the time, and usually check their websites in advance. If the church looks interesting, I'll go. But if I see that the sermon is on some tedious topic like the separation of church and state or the humanist-theist debate, I won't go. Sometimes, alas, sermon topics for an entire month are unappealing. In my experience, sermon titles turn away more people than they attract. Plus, going to church every Sunday should be in our DNA, and if the sermon is a little surprise, all the better!

The Sunday offering

Once again, I encourage Countryside to give away the offering each Sunday, to organizations in the community that live out your values. I realize there have been many discussions regarding plate offerings and the overall budget. The Sunday offering is a powerful, soul-stirring ministry. Giving it away each Sunday means the congregation will be successful in its social action work every time people gather together.

Admittedly, this is a leap of faith. But in my experience, if it's the right thing to do, the money will follow. The current proposal, to give half the offering, will have about a \$6,000 impact on the budget. (The current plate offering brings in about \$12,000 each year.) I believe this is a modest risk for a congregation of your size and resources.

By the way, doing something new on a trial basis is an excellent strategy. Giving away the Sunday offering is a perfect example. Countryside might do this for a period of six months, to see how it plays out. Such trial periods will help reassure those who are uncertain that a new initiative is not cast in stone.

New opportunities

If Countryside commits the Sunday offering to outreach, part of the money could go into a New Opportunities Seed Fund. This fund would be available to church members who have great ideas, but who might like some working capital -- like a venture capital fund for the church.

Previous recommendations

And along the lines of new ideas, three recommendations from my previous report didn't draw much reaction. One was a day of silence each quarter, another was encouraging Countryside members to observe some type of Sabbath, and the third was an informal relationship with an ethnic congregation.

With Countryside bringing in some 50 new members this year, maybe these new members might be asked to take on these initiatives (or others of your choice).

Give those new members a long leash in figuring out how to do it. What a great way to build committed members and potential new leaders.

The pledge drive

In churches of all faiths, things are as they are, sometimes for reasons that go back decades and decades. One such issue at Countryside is the annual pledge drive. In the current pledge drive now underway, only 40 households, which constitute 24 percent of Countryside donors, have pledged almost 60 percent of the total amount. On the other end, about 100 households, 48 percent of donors, pledged 19 percent of the total. Almost half of Countryside donors give \$20 per week or less, and of this group, a sizable percentage give less than \$10 per week.

I began this report with the observation that almost all problem areas can be traced back to low expectations of membership. This is most applicable in regard to congregational pledging. Pledging at Countryside is highly inequitable, with a small number of members paying the way for a much larger number of members.

The very best way to change this culture is to adopt the standards I suggest regarding Integrity of Membership, or Membership in Good Standing. Over time, new people coming in will bring a new era of committed members.

Finally, a new dimension to congregational life?

During a chance conversation while I was in Palatine, I mentioned working with an Episcopal church in Boulder, Colorado, where I live. The minister said the church had the perfect RE director, a woman who worked 70-75 hours per week, but who had resigned abruptly after two years because the job was killing her. Everyone was surprised she left, claiming they had no idea the job was so stressful.

This brought about some soul-searching among the church's leaders, not only about lengthy hours the staff worked, but also about the fiendishly busy lives that members themselves lived – long hours on the job, working six and seven days a week, and extended periods of business travel away from home.

In America today, working long hours has become a badge of honor. The New York Times recently carried an article about high school girls in affluent communities putting in 17-hour days, striving to gain admittance to exclusive colleges. A guidance counselor at one high school was quoted as saying, "These highly driven young women have no souls."

Since this church is Christian in theology, the leadership brought this issue to the congregation, asking, "Is this the kind of people God is calling us to become?"

This may not be UU theology, but the question has merit. What kind of people are we called to become in this place and time?

A closely related issue to successful careers is home size. In Boulder, new houses tend to be 6,000 to 7,000 square feet in size. It's not unusual for houses of 8,000 to 12,000 square feet to be on the market. A new house near where I live recently sold for \$22 million.

Seeking successful careers and spacious homes brings about the question I wish to raise with Countryside. Does the church have any say, any moral authority, in regard to the American desire (some say obsession) with careers and money?

Before attempting to answer this question, I wish to raise a third issue. There is no doubt about the environmental hazards of increasing amounts of arable land used to raise livestock for human consumption. I know there are vegetarians and vegans in the Countryside community who view this issue as deeply religious.

So the question I pose to the Countryside congregation is whether being successful at almost any cost is a moral issue that warrants discussion. But beyond mere discussion, is excessive consumption a way of life that a religious institution can challenge? And, can a church urge its members to reconsider their diets, to lessen consumption of animal products that are environmentally detrimental?

Some may say such discussions are important, timely, and life-transforming for the better. Others may say the church has no business in regard to our personal lives. I'm hoping Countryside will at least bring up the issue for examination.

A few closing comments

UCC minister Anthony Robinson often says that too many congregations function as though nothing important is at stake. Visitors to churches often report they see the social needs of current members being met, but do not find the spiritual journey they seek.

While I was in town, a number of congregants told me that Countryside needs to tell its story more effectively. I believe your congregation has all the intellectual and financial resources to tell a wonderful story, a church that plays a significant role in the life of the community, and a tremendous force for the good. I hope you proceed with great courage and great confidence.