Next Steps Weekend with Mark Ewert

December 6-8, 2019

Report to the Congregation

In the 2017-2018 church year, The Long Range Planning Committee collected from the congregation a wide array of hopes and dreams, the central theme of which was a robust and welcoming church, a vibrant presence within the community, and a staunch advocate of justice and compassion for all. The specifics of each of these visions varied considerably, of course, but these common themes were unmistakable. And they were inspirational. So inspirational as to lead the Board to spend considerable energy on a process of discernment that ultimately led to updated Values, Mission, and Ends Statements. These define who we are as a congregation and the difference we want to make in the world.

One of the questions that emerged during this visioning of our future was the role our historic buildings could play in their current configuration. Concerns have been identified in terms of the extent to which our buildings are seen as warm and welcoming, particularly in terms of disability access. A confusing layout of the buildings was frequently cited, along with the challenges of moving from one area of the church to the other. Also noted was a need to invest in more modern communications technology to facilitate video teleconferencing and improve audio amplification. Greening our building to allow us to act as true stewards of the environment in a manner consistent with our values was strongly embraced.

All of these require investments of our shared resources of time, money, and talent. The question then arises: are we ready to embark upon such an ambitious journey? Do we have the courage and commitment to prevail?

The Board of Trustees engaged the services of Mark Ewert, Stewardship Consultant, to help us assess our financial health and determine our readiness for a Capital Campaign in the future. Prior to his arrival for the Next Steps Weekend of December 6-8, Mark requested a comprehensive summary of the church’s history and status, ranging from past annual budgets, pledge drive campaigns, our governance structure, how well we pay our employees, to our anti-racism and multicultural efforts. During the weekend, he met with representatives from all committees and teams, as well as myriad members and friends during a Saturday lunch and after the Sunday service. He met with the Board of Trustees twice, on Friday night to ensure that our goals for the weekend aligned, and then again on Sunday to provide feedback.

This summary is designed to provide this feedback to you, members and friends of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua.

Mark identified a range of strengths he saw within our church. They include: a strong ministry and professional staff that work well as a team; a flexible and adaptable congregation with members who strongly care for each other and for those in the wider community; dedicated and capable lay leadership; consistent and wonderful worship, enhanced by an excellent music program; faith formation that has created multiple options for members of all ages; beautiful and well-maintained buildings that are right-sized for our congregation; and a congregation that has been more deliberate recently in making a solid investment in stewardship.

Mark also identified some challenges that face us based on our history or current status: caring for the needs of an older building within a historic district, particularly in terms of potential limits on making needed changes to allow for improved accessibility; considerable ambiguity as to the church’s relationship with both the preschool and the Cemetery Association; considerable historical ambiguity as to the defined purposes of the endowment; the lack of a capital campaign in decades, leading to a dynamic in which wealthier members of the congregation may take on more of the burden in funding unanticipated needs, with less expected of other members of the congregation; and a commitment to funding the church’s operations through pledges that is still in early stages of maturation despite the age of the church.

After obtaining considerable input from Mark, the Board embraced the following goals:

1. *Clarify the purposes of the endowment*. In recent memory, the congregation has voted to use the endowment above and beyond recommended levels for an array of purposes, including making up for pledge drive shortfalls, as well as improvements to the building (painting the sanctuary and installing the elevator) which were both initially conceived of as “loans” to be repaid that ultimately were not. The range of rationales offered for tapping into the endowment has contributed to a sense that the endowment is for whatever the church wants or needs it to be at any given moment. To our credit, the congregation has worked hard to increase financial support through pledging, thus allowing us to take from the endowment what is considered to be a reasonably prudent percentage, although true prudence would make it even less.

This lack of clarity as to the purpose and use of the endowment may likely be still depressing pledging levels. Mark pointed out that our church is out of balance in that almost 70% of pledging households contribute only 25% of the total income from pledges, potentially leading to income instability for the congregation if even a handful of larger pledgers become unable to contribute at such levels.

2. *Continue to develop an active Stewardship Program that includes Planned Giving*. Helming the church’s Stewardship efforts, be it as a chair or co-chair, is not only logistically challenging, but emotionally challenging, as well. The church has been extremely fortunate to have had some wonderful members take on this responsibility, and they deserve our full support and appreciation. We can provide such support by providing comprehensive orientation and training materials to reduce the sense of starting anew each time. A more intentional leadership secession plan will also strengthen continuity and provide members stepping into leadership a stronger established platform on which they can additionally build. Mark shared two remarkable observations with us. First, when we as a church tell our history, we talk about the buildings and ministers, but not about the members of the congregation. Second, we are not very good story tellers. These two aspects of ourselves combine to limit the extent to which we can tell truly inspirational stories about who we are and what impact we’ve had in the world. Once we identify and tap into these transformative stories of us, we will have a much greater capacity to emotionally engage members in a deep and responsible stewardship of the church.

3. *Clarify the relationships of the church to the preschool and to the Cemetery Association*. The preschool is formally a program of the congregation. Its teachers are classified as UUCN staff; and management and oversight are the responsibility of the minister, who is also a signatory (along with the church President) of the preschool financial accounts. Yet there is no mention of the preschool in the church’s Values, Mission, or Ends Statements. Intentionally created as non-sectarian, the preschool is only loosely based around UU principles. The relationship between the church and the preschool has not been examined in decades, creating a compelling need for clarification and definition.

The relationship between the church and the Nashua Cemetery Association is also rather murky, in part perhaps because they were established almost 200 years ago. In some ways, NCA functions as an organizational entity unto itself, with its own Board, its own tax ID number, and its own invested funds. NCA, however, is not established as a separate non-profit. It does not have its own set of by-laws, but is instead covered under the church’s by-laws. In addition, members of their Board must be members of the church. Clarifying the legal boundary between the church and the Cemetery would be prudent, as would be examining how the Cemetery fits into the mission and governance of the church.

4. *Comprehensive review of the church’s commitment to socially responsible investing.* During the past decade, the church has moved towards investing a larger portion of the endowment in socially responsible funds and companies. The wish to support such action consistent with our principles has been tempered by a concern that return rates might be lower for funds having to restrict themselves to green or socially focused companies, as well as the possibility that withdrawal from our invested funds might need to take place within specified timeframes and no longer solely at our convenience. As the number of socially responsible investment instruments has expanded, the worry about a reduced rate of return has lessened.

Beyond the funds in which the church invests, however, we must also ask whether companies that profit from doing business with UUCN have historically demonstrated ethical principles consistent with our own. Fifty years ago, the church relied upon locally-owned banks for investment services, thus being more likely to keep profits within the community. After a series of bank takeovers, however, the church’s investment funds are now largely in the hands of Bank of America. The church should reasonably ask whether the Bank of America’s business practices are consistent with our values and principles in order to ensure that our invested funds, and the profits they generate for the company, are indeed being used for the common good.

5. *Assess our readiness for a Capital Campaign:*  Overall, our church is healthy and has numerous strengths in its favor to potentially go forward with a Capital Campaign. Given the complexity of a Capital Campaign and the importance of the success of any such effort (particularly in light of our history), congregational support and input will be vital. The Building Our Vision team has already begun a process of meetings with the congregation to gather input, ideas, and suggestions, but also worries and concerns. Their work will continue. Gaining clarity on some of the issues outlined above will also be important, such as defining the use of the endowment and strengthening Stewardship, as these will serve as foundations of a successful Capital Campaign.

The impact we want to have in the world and within ourselves is truly inspirational and transformative. But good deeds require investment, and not just of time and good intentions. All of the church’s efforts and resources should ultimately have one goal: to further the mission of UUCN in a manner consistent with UU principles. This goal also requires buildings structured and equipped to support this work well into the 21st century.

In faith,

Carol Houde, Church President

Rev. Allison Palm, Minister