

Report to the Board of Trustees and the Congregation

As many All Souls members are aware, in the fall of 2008 significant changes were made in the 11:30 Sunday morning service. The dissolution of the New Dimensions Worship Center last summer presented All Souls with the opportunity of welcoming former members of that congregation as well as the New Dimensions Chorale as part of our church community. This opportunity occurred a short time before our 2008 Homecoming Sunday, making it impossible to obtain substantial input from the congregation before the changes were made.

As a result, a task force was appointed by John Greene, the 2008-2009 president of the Board of Trustees, to obtain input from the congregation with respect to the Sunday service format of the past year. The task force members are Brenda Alred, Herb Beattie, Donna Dutton, Dallas Ferguson (chair), Ruth Ferguson, Vicky and Richard George, John Greene, Laura Hailey-Butler, David Kroll, Pat Newman, Ruth Richards, Jim Rusher, Ted Sherwood, Maurice Storm, Danna Vitt, and Randy Wymore and ex officio members Marlin Lavanhar and Kathy Keith.

Among the questions the task force was asked to consider were scheduling concerns, attendance, levels of satisfaction with the changes and ways All Souls can make the services better serve the spiritual and fellowship needs of all members of our congregation. We considered these questions with the realization that cultural and religious diversity have always been hallmarks of both Unitarian Universalism and All Souls while also recognizing that unity and a sense of belonging are important to the members of our church community.

At the task force's first meeting the members shared our experiences of the past year, which areas of the church family we represented, and began making plans to conduct a survey of the congregation. One result of this meeting was that sharing our different perspectives was helpful in opening dialogue and understanding. This experience of working together as a group whose members had diverse backgrounds and interests gave us confidence that the larger congregation can also positively address the changes and concerns our task force was brought together to address. As a group representing many parts of our church, we emerged with a vision of how to move forward with a greater sense of community while also being aware of the need to better listen and understand the concerns being expressed.

The Survey

The survey that was distributed and made available to the congregation was developed by the task force with assistance from the church staff. The survey questions addressed:

- Membership status;
- How respondents became part of the church;
- What activities, services, etc., respondents participate in;
- Level of participation;
- Patterns of financial stewardship;
- Which service respondents prefer;
- Preferred time to attend service;
- Involvement with children's and adult religious education;
- and Concerns and obstacles to participation.

Summary of Survey Results

The survey was sent electronically to over 1000 email addresses the church has on file, as well as being made available in printed format in the church office. We received 502 responses (many of which represented households with more than one All Souls' member) out of a total membership of approximately 1700. The task force was pleased with this level of response as similar surveys usually have a much smaller percentage of participation. We interpreted this as indicating a high degree of commitment and interest in the issues addressed by the survey. Many respondents expressed appreciation for the opportunity to be heard.

- The following are some of the survey results:
- 92% of the 502 respondents are members.
- Of those members, 6.5% are in their first year, 24.7% have been members 1-5 years, 26% 5-15 years and 33.4% 15-50 years.
- 84.8% of respondents pledge regularly.
- 71.7% said they were attracted to All Souls because of our theology and 46% became interested by attending a Sunday service. Our music program or children's RE were also major attractors for about 28% of those responding.
- Respondents have participated in a wide variety of programs and activities with Sunday morning services being the most frequently mentioned at 65.7%.
- 81.6% of respondents said they attended the 10:00 a.m. traditional services often or sometimes, while 57.5% attended the 11:30 contemporary service also often or sometimes.
- As to the preferred time to worship, 57% of respondents preferred 10:00 while 26% preferred 11:30.
- 57.3% of respondents indicated a preference for the traditional style of worship and 21% preferred the contemporary/alternative style of worship.
- 27% of respondents have children under 18 years of age.
- 371 responses described various obstacles to church participation and there were 245 general comments and concerns.

Interpretation of Survey Results

The task force studied the responses to the survey questions and reviewed all the comments. The responses and comments came from a wide sample of the congregation, including both those who prefer the traditional service, those who prefer the contemporary service and those who enjoy both. There were also comments from those who have concerns over the changes made in the services this past year. In interpreting these responses, the task force recognized it is important to listen to these concerns and to be open to making appropriate adjustments in the Sunday services, while maintaining our central goal of working with the church community to establish an acceptable balance between the various styles of Sunday morning services. We think the recommendations for action set out below move us toward that goal.

Recommendations

After reviewing the survey responses and considering factors such as constraints of available space and parking on Sunday mornings, the task force makes the following recommendations:

1. The traditional service should continue at 10:00 and the contemporary service at 11:30.
2. As a result of comments regarding the volume of the music portion of the contemporary service and its impact on conversations and activities in the foyer and Emerson Hall, the start time for that service should be moved from 11:20 to 11:30. The doors from the foyer to the sanctuary should be closed at that time and the church staff should explore ways of improving the soundproofing of the sanctuary doors.
3. The church should retain a professional sound technician to work with the music staff to facilitate better control of the music volume during the Sunday services.
4. As another means of reducing the impact on conversations and activities in the foyer and Emerson Hall, the TV monitor in the foyer should not be used to display Sunday morning services but, instead, should be used to publicize classes, programs, etc.
5. The Emerson Hall Forum should not begin until 11:45 on Sunday mornings and we should move back to a “coffee hour” atmosphere between 11:00 and 11:45. This would allow for less congestion in the church and in the parking lot to enable time for fellowship between services and among those who attend the two services.
6. During the 2008-2009 church year, the core Children’s RE curriculum was offered during the 11:30 service. Based on survey responses from those with children in the RE program, the core curriculum should be scheduled to coincide with the 10:00 service, as it has been in the past.
7. Other questions, concerns and suggestions provided by the survey responses that relate to other areas of the church and church programs have been forwarded by the task force to the appropriate members of the church staff and boards for their consideration, actions and/or implementation.
8. Additional conversations and other communications should be scheduled over the next few months to allow for congregational input, discussion, and a sharing of differing points of view. This process should begin with the church retreat that is scheduled for August 30, 2009, and continue throughout the church year in various meetings and group discussions.

The task force wants to express its appreciation to all of those who responded to the survey and to those who assisted in other ways for their contributions to our efforts. We recognize that several of the recommended changes may be challenging. We are convinced, however, that going forward together with a respect for our differing points of view will result in a stronger and more vibrant church community that worships together in a variety of ways while sharing a common theological foundation, vision and covenant.