

The Unitarian Church in Westport

Committee on Ministries – Reflection on Mission, 2016

How We Connect

The Unitarian Church in Westport is a diverse and welcoming religious community, free of creed and dogma, and open to people of all backgrounds and beliefs.

We INSPIRE and support individual spiritual growth; we CONNECT through worship, music, learning, and caring ministries; and we ACT in the service of peace and justice.

Introduction – The Committee on Ministries (COM) is responsible for assisting the various ministries within the congregation to reflect on how they are supporting and aligning with the mission of the church.

This year the COM has determined that reflecting on how we “CONNECT” with our mission within our ministries and across ministries is a manageable and timely approach to fulfill this responsibility. The congregation continues to be in transition, and connecting is a critical aspect of successfully moving into the future of our beloved community.

The COM wants to express its sincere thanks to all of you who took time from your busy schedules to meet with COM members. We appreciate your participation and sharing with us your thoughts and ideas. You not only help us ensure we are meeting our mission but you also help us understand how to “CONNECT” better.

Process – The COM scheduled Reflection Meetings with the Board of Trustees (BOT), Senior Minister and Staff, and nearly all committees. We also held Town Meetings for congregants to reflect on How We Connect.

The five questions below provided the framework for each Reflection Meeting. The focus of our discussion was on how each group is connecting within their own group, across groups within the congregation, with the denomination, and with our larger civic community. We also discussed what and how we might do better.

Whenever possible two COM members attended each meeting.

Notes of each meeting were written up and provided to the respective committees. These notes provided the material for this written summary report. This report summarizes what the COM and each committee learned about how we are currently connecting. We discovered the discussions in Reflection Meetings stimulated additional ideas within the groups and identified opportunities for expanded connections.

Notes from the individual Reflection Meetings are attached as an Appendix. These notes provide additional detail on our discussions.

Once the report is finished and shared with the BOT and Senior Minister, meetings will be scheduled to provide members of the committees and congregation an opportunity to ask questions of the COM and to offer comments on the report. Congregants will be encouraged to provide

feedback on both the process and the report itself. We encourage feedback from everyone and will incorporate the information to improve our Reflections process for next year.

***Note on the ‘Silo Effect’:** Given our focus on Connection, it is appropriate to describe what we have termed the ‘Silo Effect’: an organizational condition characterized by functional groups being relatively isolated or disconnected from other groups or committees. Often this is a matter of self-perception or self-defined boundaries. You will see examples of the Silo Effect noted below.*

Summary of Questions Discussed – Following are highlights, major themes, and specific examples for each of the five questions in the Reflection process. Additional detail can be found in the notes for each meeting in the Appendix.

1) How are we as a congregation walking together to “Connect” through worship, music, learning, and caring ministries from your perspective?

This was a general question designed to get the discussion started. The initial reaction almost universally was that the congregation is connecting well.

As we continued our discussions, each group discovered there were areas where new connections could be established or existing connections could be improved. Some groups realized they were insulated and/or isolated from other groups in the congregation.

Below are examples of how some groups can or are addressing the “Silo effect.”

- The Non-Violent Communication Committee realized they could connect with many other committees and offer information and skills to improve communications within and beyond the group itself.
- Neighborhood Circles could work with the Membership Committee to provide connection and orientation for our newer members.
- The Homecoming Committee Fair provided an opportunity for committees to reach out to and inform members of the congregation about the work they do.
- While Worship Associates connect closely with Rev. John, Ed, Pastoral Care Chaplains, and the Ushers, interactions with other groups and committees would be welcome, especially in finding ways for more members to be included in our regular services.

2) How well do we connect and communicate with each other within this group?

All groups indicated they effectively communicate with each other using meetings, phone and email. Few groups reported using Realm for communication. All groups indicated relationships and connections between members within the group are positive. They used words like supportive, attentive, respectful, engaged, and trusting to describe these relationships.

Note: In a volunteer organization, it is not surprising that the members of the committees are happy. If a person is not happy with how a committee is being run, they leave.

Many groups have written functional covenants, which support right relations among members and minimize strife. In one instance, having a functional covenant allowed a group to successfully bring back into the group someone who was out of covenant. (We are not identifying the group because their covenant includes confidentiality.)

In a very different instance one committee, which does not have a functional covenant, did not accommodate a member's request to change the time of the meeting because of a conflict with work. Having a functional covenant would have minimized the conflict in this situation.

3) How well do we connect and communicate with other groups and ministries within the congregation?

Most groups communicate with other groups through:

- Regular columns and articles in Soundings and eblasts, e.g., Beardsley columns, John's Pastoral Letter, Voices Café.
- Joint meetings, e.g., Finance, Human Resources and Staff meet to discuss Benefits issues when changes need to be made and there are implications for each group.
- Homecoming Committee Fair – sponsored by the Nominating and Leadership Development Committee (NLDC) connects people and needs within the church.
- The Elected Committees met to clarify reporting and inter-committee relationships.
- Worship Associates felt our Order of Service may be under-utilized as an information tool. Including descriptions of ongoing activities, events, or groups such as the Shawl Ministry, Movie Night, and Meditation, with the name of a person to contact, if interested, would promote greater connections among members and friends.

Note: Elected Committees include the BOT, the COM, Endowment and the LDC. It is unusual for a UU congregation to have so many elected committees. It is important to recognize this structure is a product of our history and our polity. As a result of this structure, it is important for all committees to work well together.

Most groups were comfortable with the level of communication with other groups. However possibilities and opportunities for greater collaboration were identified as discussion continued. The discussions highlighted the silo effect and the limitations of not connecting with other groups. As a result, some groups saw new opportunities for additional connections.

There were also a number of exceptions. Examples of disconnection include:

- Endowment and Finance do not attend each other's meetings, despite requests by the Finance Committee.
- Lifetime Faith Development (LFD) faces significant challenges in finding enough volunteers to teach. Parents are not responding in sufficient numbers and some groups, such as SGM and Neighborhood Circles are not involved.
- We discovered that the Shawl Ministry is our 'best kept secret' in that they do not receive requests from any other group.

A number of groups also identified some issues with the communication process.

- There is no framework for allocating foyer space during coffee hour, nor a clear process for getting bulletin board space.
- While there is a process for getting meeting space, there does not appear to be a process for prioritizing.
- Many expressed concern that uwestport.org is difficult to navigate and finding specific information is 'not intuitive.'

4) How well do we connect with the larger community – the UU District, Unitarian Universalist Association and if applicable the local community?

There are many positive connections between the congregation and the greater community. Many of these fall into the Social Justice arena. Many groups, even if they recognized connections with the greater community, did not initially think of this aspect of their work as connections in support of the church's mission. This reflection process highlighted the need for greater understanding that all of our activities must align with our mission.

Following are some examples of connection to the greater community:

- Participation in denomination events – District meetings, General Assembly, individuals serving at denomination level.
- Our youth is leading the way in connecting with the denomination through hosting and participation in regional youth conferences (CONs).
- LFD outreach to other faiths through bringing speakers into classes and taking field trips to other churches, mosques, and temples.
- Free public concerts sponsored by the Music Committee
- Social Justice programs that reach out to the world – KIVA, IICON supporting setting up apartments for immigrants coming to our area, the UN connection, Beardsley School, Voices Café, Mercy Learning Center, Connecticut Food Bank.

Several groups recognized the shift that Rev. John has energized in our overall connection to the greater world. These connections include joining the Bridgeport Council of Churches, various marches, demonstrations and vigils, and creating an Intern Minister program.

On the negative side, various efforts to connect with the broader community have also created consternation and even anxiety in a portion of the congregation. Some congregants have expressed the need to look inward more to the spiritual health of the congregation. Some fear was expressed which stemmed from putting up the Black Lives Matter banner.

Note: Any change will create anxiety for some and Connection calls us to hold the anxious in our communal embrace.

5) How can we connect better?

Some basic observations occurred in almost every discussion.

- **Addressing the silo effect** – Groups discovered they have greater opportunity to connect with other groups within and beyond the congregation, and many have expressed their intent to increase their outreach.
- **Incorporating new people and the next generation** – There is still too small a group that ends up doing too much, which does not allow openings for the next generation. This creates the need to bring in new members, including young families, to ensure the work of the congregation carries into the next generation.
- **Greater IT utilization** – We need new approaches and systems that emphasize ease of use, upgrading user skills, and providing assistance for older members of the community.

Recommendations from the Committee on Ministries (COM)

- Establish a policy that each committee have a group charter and living covenant.
- Continue to support communication and identification of boundaries between the elected committees (COM, BOT, Endowment and LDC), through periodic meetings, review of the covenant with updating as needed, and discussion of issues that create undue pressure and inefficient use of time on Staff.
- Create a financial council that includes Endowment, Finance, Stewardship and appropriate Staff.
- Encourage the Compassionate Communications (NVC) group to become more involved in offering their knowledge and skills to other groups within the congregation.
- Rethink the use of space in the foyer including increasing bulletin board space and a transparent process for assigning table space. Consider a more honored place for Munoz tables, so the foyer can be better utilized.
- Reassess the purpose of Neighborhood Circle Program and possibly integrate with a revitalized Membership Committee. We hope with time every community member will see themselves as ‘on the Membership Committee’ and thereby practice ‘radical hospitality’.
- The UU Speaker Series, which is fully funded, should continue in its revitalization.