

Senior Minister's Report to the Board of Trustees

November 2019

Ends Report on 1.2.4

1.2.4 We are a sustainable, robust Congregation comprised of all generations.

Executive Interpretation: I take this to mean that our membership, financial and programmatic efforts sustain us as a growing and healthy multigenerational congregation into the future. This has several dimensions. The first is that our membership retention efforts continue to improve so that we are outpacing the natural attrition of attendance. Second, that our stewardship efforts maintain a healthy giving level. And finally, that our efforts towards attracting families through our Faith Formation Ministry results in a younger population which will ensure our sustainability into the future.

Report: I will examine where we are on membership retention and attracting young families, leaving our stewardship efforts for other reports in the future.

Membership growth has been a challenge for us. Our attendance appears to be increasing from 187 adults, 70 children as of November 2019 to 179 adults, 45 children in March 2019. Our membership dropped from 378 to 351 members over a eight month period. Our active adult friends, many of whom give financially, has risen from about 150 to 200. Our efforts towards turning friends into members remains a challenge. While our Membership Director does a good job meeting with new people, we know that without meaningful engagement of newcomers by more experienced members, it is difficult to turn those friends into members and, more importantly to retain our members after several years. We have many programs in place that can achieve this: Small Group Ministry, Neighborhood Circles, Adult Faith Formation classes, and our Choirs, to name a few. The key is to have lay members invite newcomers (friends and new members) into these groups. To promote this David Vita has tried to reinvigorate his Membership Team with leadership. He has new people on that team but most seem more interested in welcoming people on Sunday rather than the mentoring needed to engage newcomers more fully into the congregation. We are currently working on new strategies.

Family Faith Formation growth seems to be occurring albeit slowly. In March 2019, Rev. Shelly Thompson reported 66 children and youth were registered in our program with an average attendance of 45 (this includes a certain number of visitors for which we don't have data). In November 2019, only 26 are registered (of a potential of 70 children) but our average attendance has jumped to 54. We are serving 44 families (a new category we will be tracking). To me this indicates that we have seen an increase in attendance

but inadequate attention to registration. The registration problem has several causes. The first is that registrations are typically slow in the fall. It takes some months for parents to register our children. The second cause is the reluctance new families have in registering their children, preferring to try our program out for a while. Rev. Shelly and I are addressing this with parent education and new systems in which our teachers will encourage registration. We continue to participate in the multi-congregational course "Courageous Faith Revolution" but we have not found this to be as helpful as we had hoped. Rev. Shelly is now an active member of the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) and has returned from their annual meeting with new ideas and great connections with her ministerial counterparts in Faith Formation. We now staff all of our classes with one paid teacher. This helps our parents by making it easier to volunteer as an assistant rather than the teacher responsible for curriculum planning. The exception to this is our OWL program which continues successfully with a team of committed volunteers. For the first time we have youth from the Saugatuck Congregational Church participating in our OWL program. This is especially heartening to me as OWL was a joint venture of the UUA and UCC. We instituted a monthly "Family Friendly Service" which has been well received. Overall, our Family Faith Formation Ministry is still in transition but we are seeing signs of improvement.

Our Adult Faith Formation Ministry has improved significantly. From September 2018 to March 2019, we had only offered three courses, "Building Your Own Theology" in the fall of 2018, our leadership course "Harvest the Power" as well as continuing series of classes through TUCWomen. Between May and November 2019, we have offered six courses, "Spiritual Autobiography", "Building Personal Resiliency"; "Exploring Dissent in Religion", "Neighboring Faiths for Adults", "The Power of Now", and "Visionary Women". Rev. Shelly is doing an excellent job curating and supporting this ministry.

Conclusion: We are seeing an overall increase of attendance of children and adults over the last six to seven months. This is encouraging. Still concerning is the fact that our membership remains basically flat or dropping (i.e. at best, we are only adding enough new members to replace those who leave). The gap between attendance and committed membership needs to be lessened. I will continue to look for ways, such as mentoring newcomers, to encourage these new people to take the step to membership. While I recognize that demographically less and less people are "joining" churches, increased membership still leads to a deeper and therefore more sustainable multi-generational congregation.

Respectfully Submitted, Rev. Dr. John T. Morehouse