

February 16, 2017

Friends,

As we emerge from the deepest and darkest part of winter we still have several weeks before the promise of Spring emerges. It is a quiet time for reflection and thought about what lies ahead. In keeping with the season, I want to use this space today to address the results of the Healthy Reconciliation Task Force (HRTF) and reflect on what was learned. For those of you who are new to our congregation, please accept my apology for addressing old business here. This congregation is excited about the future and the many new faces in our midst, and we are delighted to have you. As with all congregations, we have ongoing business and issues that must be addressed. One of these topics, a particularly thorny one, is discussed in the links provided below. I share this information with you here in hopes of demonstrating the willingness of our congregation and the action of our leadership to deal with our issues in a caring and forthright manner and to make changes based on the articulated needs. I apologize for the length of these reports, but felt the subject to be important enough to explain fully.

The report to the Board from the listening group subcommittee of the HRTF was reviewed, approved by the Board and the text of it is printed below. As you read it, please remember that I was a congregant, not a Board member, when appointed by the Board to serve and chair this committee. Some congregants are disappointed with not being able to review the raw data. The comments below are presented to illustrate the principles that were fundamental to the actions taken.

First, the committee promised to guarantee anonymity and confidentiality to all who chose to participate in listening sessions. The second promise was that the raw data gathered, the notes from the individual listening sessions, would be open for review by any congregant wishing to see them. Although meticulous attention was dedicated to protecting the identity of those who spoke as well as those about whom were spoken, as the project neared completion it became clear that identities were easily revealed by indirect correlation of the stories presented. This realization prompted an exploration of standard ethical conduct when dealing with two conflicting objectives. Without question, the clear ethical choice is to honor the objective that provides the greatest good to the largest number. In our estimation, the only ethically correct choice for us, the listening subcommittee, was to protect the identity of all concerned.

Secondly, the decision to destroy the raw data was based on review of procedures for managing information gathered in this type of research. It is, in fact, standard research practice to destroy these kinds of records. The reasons for this are varied, but perhaps primary among them is that all the data garnered from interviews is not typically correct and the dissemination of inaccurate information leads to even greater communications problems. Along those lines, one glaring result of the sessions we conducted was the demonstration of multiple variations of commonly reported issues. Unfortunately, the corollary to this dangerous phenomenon of gossip was that each reporter believed his or her version to be "the truth" and their opinions

and actions were frequently based on their erroneous data. Such uninformed actions led to a significant escalation of conflict in our congregation.

That said, it became apparent that there was a basic design flaw in the data collection. Our project was structured to embrace the trajectory and spirit of the work of Mandela and Tutu. However, in the end, it was determined that the confounding variable was that their work was based on reports of direct experience only. In contrast, ours actually reflected very few direct experiences and many reports were clearly based on multiple layers of hearsay.

Worthy of note is that this was a listening exercise only. No corrections or judgements of any sort were offered by the listeners. That said, irrespective of the actual accuracy of the reports, there was great appreciation on the part of those who were heard. Emotional release to the point of tears was not uncommon and much healing occurred as a result.

With 56 listening sessions there were many issues addressed. No judgement was made regarding order of importance and, while individual points were not presented in our report, two broad areas were frequently identified as being problematic by those who spoke. The first of these relates to administrative shortfalls and much has already been done to address our inadequacies in this area. Seven identifiable measures have already been instituted to preclude or rectify issues that arose from the precipitating incident. These are listed in the minutes of the January 2017 Board meeting and several others are under consideration. (These minutes will be available online pending Board approval at the meeting on February 20th.) The second general category of concern is the lack of effective communications across all aspects of our organization. This is more difficult to organize, but in the final analysis simple adherence to covenantal behavior by all congregants is perceived as a simple and effective way to achieve significant improvement in how we communicate. Our greatest tool to avert conflict is modeling covenantal communications ourselves as well as requiring the same in others.

These are troubling times which hold the potential for us to experience much growth as a congregation. Our need to pull together in support of our social justice values has never been greater and doing so will only serve to make us a closer and stronger community. Let's use this challenge to grow and let that growth be nourished by individual and group commitment to living, being and communicating in accordance with our covenant.

And so.....ONWARD! Into the days which hold the promise of Spring and new beginnings all around.

May we go and grow in peace and loving kindness.

I thank you for the honor of serving this very unique community,

Linda

HEALTHY RECONCILIATIONS SUB COMMITTEE REPORT

[Submitted to and approved by the UUCGT Board of Trustees, January 2017 Board Meeting]

BACKGROUND

The Healthy Reconciliations Committee was formed by direction of the Board in response to findings from the antecedent committee of nine that formed to explore how our congregational communications could be improved. That committee determined that the congregation had strayed from the basic requirements of our covenant and recommended that we return to it while emphasizing the importance of individual responsibility for fostering covenantal behavior in ourselves and our fellow congregants.

The Healthy Reconciliations Committee was appointed and charged with providing a way to reconcile the unresolved issues that arose as a result of the personnel issues that began in August of 2015 and have lingered in some measure to date. Because our congregational communications during that turbulent time had been so out of covenant, there had not been any factual exchange of information regarding the events, emotions and possible resolutions to these painful difficulties. As a result, this committee appointed a subcommittee of three to actually listen to whatever congregants and friends wished to express about the original event and the events that subsequently surrounded it. In short, the purposes of the listening sessions were crafted to provide a pathway to return to covenantal communications.

Toward that end, the trio was officially charged with offering listening sessions to current, former and potential congregational members as well as to staff. They were to provide a mechanism for every voice and opinion seeking to be recognized and clearly heard by a member of the congregation who was officially charged with listening to all who wished to speak. The listeners were obligated to engage in active listening only. All comments and perspectives were received without rendering judgement, correction or interpretation. Additionally, the contents of the session were recorded in written form by the listeners and verified as correct by the speaker before the session results were finalized.

The listening began in July and concluded in late October. There was a total of 56 requests for listening sessions. All requests to be heard were accommodated.

Participants were guaranteed that their comments would be anonymous and confidential. It was also agreed that these anonymous and confidential results would be available for review by any interested congregant.

FINDINGS

The three listeners have met and reviewed our individual and collective findings some of which are summarized below:

1. The events that surrounded the separation of the music director from the UUCGT resulted in turmoil that, although slowly diminishing, caused significant damage to our individual congregants and the congregation as a whole, and continues to reverberate in our congregation.
2. The depth of the personal disruption experienced ranged from distress regarding administrative issues to deep despair related to feelings of loss of a spiritual home.
3. The issues most frequently identified were the lack of appropriate policies and procedures and suboptimal management of the situation by the Board and those involved in management.
4. The most worrisome and consistent finding of the listening team was the wide variety of what congregants had accepted as factual data. For each issue that arose there were many conflicting reports and divergent versions of "the truth". It became clear that much of the pain endured and confusion experienced was derived from altered or completely incorrect data commonly known as gossip.

There was much additional information gathered. However, we, the listeners, determined that releasing the documents generated, as was originally promised, will not be possible. Although great care was taken to eliminate names, we believe the events and issues presented will reveal the identity of the various persons involved. Because of that possible indirect correlation of information, the anonymity of the involved individuals is easily violated. It is our belief that our promise of confidentiality for all individuals overshadows the promise to allow general congregational access to these documents. As a result, this subcommittee has determined it is not in the best interest of the congregation to release our records of our individual listening sessions.

Irrespective of this unexpected outcome, we found this exercise to be of benefit in many ways. The first of these is that so many people were willing, able and even eager to come and discuss their painful experiences. There were many tears and much gratitude for the opportunity to express such difficult feelings and thoughts. Many felt it was the first time their pain had been recognized, heard and honored by the governing and administrative elements of our congregation.

Lastly, we, the three who conducted the listening sessions, are even more convinced than ever that our covenant is not only our foundation, but also our greatest tool to sustain and promote growth and love within our congregation.....our community.

Signed by:

Linda Fletcher

Joan Sheard

Jane Watts