Looking back on the Roots and Wings Conversation

This has been one of the fullest winters in congregational life I can remember. And I'm not just talking about the snow.

On February 15, the Committee on Ministry hosted a congregational conversation during worship, which we called "Roots and Wings." We wanted to acknowledge our history and tradition while examining the biggest issues we face, as we reach toward our future.

At the beginning we named the three biggest challenges that keep coming up in cottage conversations:

- Long-term sustainability in relation to finances and membership (we need more money, more members, and more leaders)
- Our organizational structure no longer aligns with our resources and needs
- The feeling of disconnect between "upstairs and downstairs"(which we seem to agree is an unfortunate and sometimes divisive shorthand for something we're having a hard time naming)

After asking and answering questions in the large group, we made One Bold Statement: "This work is so important, and these issues are so complex, that we need guidance from a professional facilitator."

We divided up into five groups on a spectrum from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree," and one person from each group reported back to the whole. It wasn't perfect, but we got to see the whole spectrum of feelings and ideas, not just the strongest held ones.

What surprised us, the members of the Committee on Ministry, was that there was a lot of agreement between the groups, a sense that the work is hard and we could benefit from the assistance of a third-party expert; at the same time acknowledging that an "outsider," for a variety of reasons, might not be effective There was strong agreement that we have among us an incredible amount of skill and commitment to do this on our own.

Our original plan was to end by summing up what had been shared, and NOT MAKING A PLAN. But, as happens, there was strong energy to do something NOW, and I (Rev Denis) got swept up in it, abandoning the plan. For that, I am truly sorry.

In the excitement, two working groups formed.

The first group will RESEARCH what a facilitator could do, what a facilitator might cost, and in the process figure out who that person could be. It was not a decision to hire someone, simply a mechanism for making a more informed decision, based at least in part on facts and figures and not just "feeling." The search would also include training for laypeople to lead organizational change, and /or assistance provided by the UUA through our regional staff.

The second group will begin "conducting rigorous ASSESSMENTS that lead to accurate problem identification," the very first step Brené Brown describes in her book Strong Ground, for facing the challenges of changes that require changes in systems and cultures. Brown wrote effectively about the complexity and interconnectivity of issues like the ones we are facing, and how effective change is slow and must be intentional.

It's important to say here that when Dr. Brown talks about conducting "rigorous assessments," she's not talking about conducting a survey through an app. In fact, she says clearly in the reading Barbara shared that there is no quick fix, no app, no survey that can even begin to make deep changes. We are going to need to figure it out face to face, together, talking and listening.

Whatever happens, whether we do this completely on our own, with some help from UUA staff, or with a guide committed to accompanying us through it, this is a process that will take time, patience and commitment if it is to be successful. Your Committee on Ministry thanks you for your willingness to participate in fulfillment of our covenant.

As the RESEARCH and ASSESMENTS groups start their work, the COM will put out an “Idea Box” in the sanctuary. If you have any ideas for how to move forward or how to frame the issues productively, please jot it down and get it in there.

In Peace,

Rev Denis Paul, Minister

Lee Cowan, Director of Faith Exploration