

Lessons Learned by UUFS Team in “Lay-Led Congregations” Workshop

By Laura Milner



Pictured above, left to right: Relinda Walker, Cynthia Frost, Dee Liston, Shari Barr

In November, the Fellowship’s outgoing and incoming presidents, Adrienne Cohen and Dee Liston, reached out to the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Southern Region Representative, Rev. Kathy McGowan to identify support for UUFS in the coming year.

Their goal, Liston says, was to learn from other congregations “as we engage in developing a 5-year plan and restructuring UUFS to better ‘empower and enhance everyone’s participation,’ as stated in our By-Laws. McGowan encouraged us to send a team to an online workshop, ‘Essentials for Lay-Led Congregations.’”

The December 10 workshop was not an exact fit for the Fellowship at the moment, which expects to continue with its halftime minister, Rev. Jane Page, until her retirement in 2026. But Liston and three others decided to attend the online workshop.

The four attendees --- Liston, Cynthia Frost, Shari Barr, and Relinda Walker --- met recently to share with each other what they learned from their individual workshop sessions. Below are the sessions each person attended and their “take-home” highlights:

(Below is the continuation of this article that started on the January newsletter.)

Dee Liston: “Leadership Development” and “Kitchen Sink”

First, I learned that we are not alone. Many congregations --- large, small and in-between, with and without ministers --- face similar challenges as a few members who overworked during the COVID pandemic are experiencing burnout. Several congregations have one person or a small handful of people who serve on every committee and/or house the congregational knowledge, history and “keys” (literally and metaphorically).

Second, we should engage with joy and reverence in getting the work done as well as ensuring programming needs are met. Remembering to “make it fun,” we should engage in leadership development as faith development. When we grow deeper in relationship with our covenants and see ourselves as a team, we start to fill our cups rather than deplete them.

Third, on the practical side, we could develop spreadsheets to identify who is doing/has done which tasks, who has particular talents and skills to share, and who wants to do particular things for the congregation. Carefully charting the tasks, talents and skills needed will help us to connect people with tasks and will ensure more even shouldering of responsibilities.

Lastly, when two or more people come together to accomplish tasks for the congregation, they might begin with a moment of ritual or conscious connection to community, love and spirit.

Cynthia Frost: “Family Ministry” and “Pastoral Care”

Cynthia’s highlights include the following:

1. The church needs to make life easier for families, not harder. Most folks in their 30's-50's don't have time to help with activities or chair committees like they did in earlier times.
2. Sunday is no longer a day that is kept free of other activities. Might be best to schedule some activities on days other than Sunday mornings.
3. We need to and want to keep track of who is in attendance at our services and events: Information flow, not Big Brother. Then pastoral care and membership committees know to check in when folks aren't seen.
4. Make sure the Fellowship’s members and friends know that pastoral care help exists for them. We need to define more clearly what constitutes “pastoral care” vs “care-ring” or mental health support.
5. Have everything we do posted on the UUFS website so people looking for a religious home can see what all we do.

Shari Barr: “Pastoral Care” and “Small Group Ministry”

Shari says the inspiration she drew from these two sessions is best captured in the following statements and phrases:

We have what we need - one another!

As we are learning and growing together, I hope we can be about:

- *providing access to enriching, enlivening engagement,
- *helping invite, encourage & allow congregants to come alive,
- *slowing down to savor, and
- *listening/supporting as we work together, growing a culture of caring.

Relinda Walker: “Leadership Development” and “Worship”

Reflections from Relinda:

~Several similar-sized congregations mentioned that they have too many committees, with a few people serving on multiples. We need to find ways to get a job done in simpler fashion: Use co-chairs, time-limited task forces, and redefine what is actually needed now.

~It’s OK to “tear the whole thing down,” to reevaluate who we are, what we want now, and re-invent organizational structure in terms of available resources.

~It's problematic when a strong leader is doing too much. This causes others to step back, leaving the leader to do more and more and eventually burn out.

~Don't confuse these two: (1) creating ways for people to participate in the fellowship and (2) creating appropriate governance structure. Different purpose/mind set.

~If using local speakers, particularly university professors, you may have a good lecture series without any sense of UU identity. Be sure to balance the info-sessions with UU-centered focus such as asking speakers to connect their topic with one or more of our principles and purposes.

~A few concrete suggestions:

Identify a task that needs doing, then recruit a "task force" to tackle the issue with an expected finish date.

Host a committee work session after church; each person chooses ONE of four groups (four corners of the sanctuary) and each group does the actual planning then and there. This prevents protracted, non-productive committee work and also prevents the same members from serving on multiple committees.
