

VISIONING CIRCLES 2013: SUMMARY FINDINGS

Congregational Report from the Building Our Future Committee



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October 20, 2013

VISIONING CIRCLES 2013: SUMMARY FINDINGS

Building Our Future Committee

This report highlights the primary findings from the 23 Visioning Circles, two of which involved our youth, conducted July-September 2013 by the Building Our Future committee. Modeled upon the cottage meeting process used for the sanctuary building, these circles asked participants what they value about our current buildings and campus and what they would like to see changed to enhance our values and mission. More than 175 WUUs participated in these Visioning Circles.

Circles were facilitated by ten WUUs who volunteered their time for training and then leading from one to three different Visioning Circles each. In addition, each circle was attended by one of Building Our Future (BOF) committee members who took notes, organized them, and filed them for categorizing and printing. These comments have been posted in the sanctuary and are accessible on the WUU web site.

Although some participants are satisfied with our current facilities and grounds, others envisioned a variety of changes to enhance and expand our programs. The BOF committee has identified major trends revealed by these Visioning Circles and presents them here.

Question 1: What do we value about our current facilities?

- Sanctuary and grounds

Question 2: What would we like to see changed to enhance our current programs?

- A quieter, expanded narthex (lobby)
- A Lifespan Faith Development addition bringing children closer to the sanctuary building
- Multi-functional spaces for fellowship, meetings, and community outreach
- Support spaces

Change and expansion have been discussed at WUU since 1993, when it was clear the congregation could only afford a main building without additional religious education, office, or meeting space. Almost 20 years of discussion conclude that:

- 1993--“we can live with but probably not grow with” Fahs (*Task Force for Space Needs*)
- 1997—a two-story addition for religious education and library is desirable
- 2006—“better facilities...for Lifespan Faith Development” (*Congregational Retreat*)
- 2010—our current facilities inhibit our values and mission, especially in religious education (*Report of the 2009 Facilities Development Committee*)

The 2013 Visioning Circles continued this process of evaluation and envisioning and lead WUUs to a decision about next steps. Should the Board and Congregation agree to complete the exploratory phase, these actions will be taken:

- Hiring an architect for preliminary planning and architectural design options
- Conducting a fundraising feasibility study with assistance from our UUA consultant.

The Board will review the gathered information and make a proposal on which the congregation will vote Sunday, November 17, 2013, at 12:30 in the Sanctuary.

SANCTUARY

MISSION -- to serve our members and friends by providing a welcoming community to explore and encourage personal spiritual growth.

CURRENT SITUATION

The sanctuary is widely regarded as very special and meaningful. Many consider it the spiritual heart of WUU, providing a non-proselytizing and uplifting space in which to both think and feel.

While some spoke about space limitations and the poor acoustics for speaking, many more praised its architecture and design saying it fostered serenity, calm, comfort, unity and peace. Many tied these and other similar positive feelings about the sanctuary feelings to:

- The inviting way it is situated on our open and green campus back from Ironbound.
- Its simplicity.
- The openness of its soaring interior space, as well as the quality and quantity of light.
- The windows that not only admit light but also connect us with nature and the seasons.

There is very strong feeling among many congregants that nothing should be done to change the design and character of the sanctuary or, if it is enlarged, to retain its intimacy and character.

The sanctuary is one of the main reasons many attend WUU.

It is interesting that while many praised its flexibility, others felt that using it for functions like the auction and yard sale detract from their sense of its spirituality.

CONCERNS AND NEED FOR CHANGE

While excellent for the choir and musical presentations, sanctuary acoustics need to be improved so that speakers can be heard more clearly.

Sanctuary seating is nearly full. Current capacity using folding chairs against the back wall is 220. Our average Sunday attendance is 154, including 25 children. The UUA considers a sanctuary full when 80% of the seats are occupied which for WUU is 176.

SUMMARY

Preserve the design and the character of the sanctuary.

Improve congregants' ability to hear speakers without compromising choral/musical acoustics.

Investigate options such as multiple services or streaming audio/video to additional spaces.

Consider modest expansion that would preserve the sanctuary's design and character.

NARTHEX (LOBBY)

MISSION -- to serve ...our members and friends..., greater Williamsburg..., and liberal religion.

Our first three statements of mission are presently hindered by the narthex (lobby). Though the narthex has multiple purposes such as access to other spaces, its primary purpose in serving our mission is to be welcoming to visitors and to promote interaction among congregants.

CURRENT SITUATION

Numerous comments describe crowded, noisy, and difficult-to-navigate conditions and ask for more space and better acoustics. Also noted were:

- There is no place to sit indoors or set down a cup of coffee while at tables or lounging.
- The circulation in and out of adjacent spaces is difficult.
- Narthex is not conducive to people staying and engaging in conversation and making connections.
- Narthex is not conducive to retaining new or interested people who could become members.
- Space for the variety of displays is inadequate and while lining the walls they encroach on socializing space.

CONCERNS AND NEED FOR CHANGE

More space is needed to serve the mission by solving acoustic and circulation problems, while including a variety of spaces for a variety of ways to interact. The narthex needs to provide better visual connection with the sanctuary when used as overflow for services.

SUMMARY

To meet our needs the narthex must be altered and enlarged to include mingling spaces while standing, conversational spaces while sitting, a place for children, and space for displays to encourage interaction. At the same time it must work well as the route to most of the other functions of our facility: the sanctuary, religious education spaces, small and large meeting spaces, office space, toilets, kitchen and outdoor social space. Acoustic control is paramount--both within the space and between it and the sanctuary. When enlarged the narthex could also become a sort of “commons” adequate in size for a variety of events, precluding at least one additional large meeting room.

LIFESPAN FAITH DEVELOPMENT (LFD)

MISSION -- To serve our members and friends by providing a welcoming, inclusive community to explore and encourage personal spiritual growth.

CURRENT SITUATION

The majority of our Lifespan Faith Development (LFD) classes and activities are conducted in two separate buildings on the WUU campus, across the parking lot and some distance from the Sanctuary. Fahs House is generally used for elementary and middle school classes, while Parker is used for high school/YRUU classes, group meetings, and WUU offices. There are currently no dedicated spaces for adult LFD classes. While comments from the Visioning Circles indicate that some members are satisfied with these spaces, the vast majority of the congregation – particularly youth and families – believe that significant changes are needed.

CONCERNS AND NEED FOR CHANGE

Common concerns that arose across most Visioning Circles:

- **Safety:** Children should not have to cross the parking lot in rain and other foul weather, or negotiate traffic in order to attend classes. We need a REAL playground for our children: this should not be located right next to a busy road, and should be easily accessible from classrooms. Neither Parker nor Fahs is ADA compliant.
- **Separation vs. Isolation:** Maintain separate spaces for use by elementary, middle, and high school groups, as well as adult groups, but move these spaces closer to the Sanctuary. Parents lament emotional isolation arising from “sending children away” from Sanctuary to LFD classes. Parents must circulate from nursery to Sanctuary to Fahs and back again, making it difficult to connect with other WUUs.
- **Inadequate Space:** Space/facilities limit the types of classes we can offer. We are limited in our ability to effectively manage the classes we do offer. Children are packed into small classrooms. No group should have to meet in a basement, the current meeting space for YRUU.
- **Appearance:** LFD spaces should mirror the qualities of the Sanctuary; our children deserve the same qualities in worship space that adults enjoy in the Sanctuary.

A crystallizing thought from one Visioning Circle: “Our current RE and LFD programs are small, inadequate, and makeshift. They do not do credit to our church.”

SUMMARY

Currently, the spaces dedicated to LFD define and ultimately limit how we carry out this component of our mission. It is impossible to simultaneously offer youth, high school and adult LFD classes on Sundays. In reality, our mission and congregational needs should define how our LFD spaces are designed and used. Based on the many concerns expressed in multiple Visioning Circles, a simple restructuring of Fahs/Parker will not be adequate. Serious consideration should be given to the design and construction of new spaces, connected to the Sanctuary, so that we can develop and maintain a vibrant LFD program into the future.

SOCIAL, MEETING AND PROGRAM SPACES

MISSION -- to provide a welcoming, inclusive community to encourage personal spiritual growth and to participate in transformative action.

CURRENT SITUATION

Social, meeting, and program space is limited and dependent upon converting spaces from one function to another. Most meetings occur in Parker and Fahs: Parker House is not ADA-compliant; Fahs is difficult for those using walkers or wheelchairs. Limited space affects what WUU currently offers and restricts future programming, especially with and for the larger community.

- Social space is either in spaces too small (narthex and Fahs), or must be set up/taken down before or after services, or limits how many can attend.
- Meeting space is limited to small groups or to meeting in the acoustically-unfriendly sanctuary.
- Music programs have no designated rehearsal and storage spaces.
- Programs such as WALT must be held off-campus for lack of space, limiting the opportunity for the community to visit and learn more about WUU.
- Programs related to social justice either limit our own use of our facilities (homeless shelter) or cannot be offered because of limited space (incubator start-ups, support groups, community outreach for low-income and others in the wider area).

CONCERNS AND NEED FOR CHANGE

Comments from Visioning Circles show need for multi-functional space attached to the sanctuary building that can be used for current and future WUU programs. Uses include:

- Fellowship hall with attached kitchen for potlucks and other food events, large receptions, fund-raising events (auction, yard sale), and community events.
- Meeting space for current groups and future initiatives including cluster and regional UU gatherings, community meetings, and social justice and community outreach.
- Meeting space for Sunday groups/gatherings that might occur simultaneous to Sunday services or between services—adult LFD, breakfasts or brunches, new member receptions, covenant groups, and connecting with friends.
- Program space for children's/youth activities including workshops, overnights, and conferences.
- Program space for choir and storage for our expanding music program
- Program space, perhaps a designated small chapel, for small weddings and memorial services, children's chapel, college worship, individual meditation
- Program space for activities such as adult LFD, covenant groups, and WALT.
- Program and meeting space for WUU ministers and staff.

SUMMARY

With shortcomings in social, meeting, and program space, WUU needs multi-purpose space connected to the sanctuary building.

*IT HAPPENS ONCE A GENERATION OR TWO:
AFFIRMING & ENABLING OUR VISION, BUILDING OUR FUTURE*

SUPPORT SPACES

MISSION -- to serve...liberal religion by embodying Unitarian Universalist values within our congregation and in society at large; (and) the global community by participating in transformative action to achieve a sustainable and humane world.

CURRENT SITUATION

There is general agreement that WUU programs and ministries are restricted by our current facilities. Changes have been suggested to expand and/or improve these areas:

- Playground
- Outdoor spaces
- Kitchen
- Technology
- Restrooms
- Storage
- Library
- Offices
- WALT
- Parking/traffic flow

CONCERNS AND NEED FOR CHANGE

- **Playground** is located near a dangerous road which causes concern for the safety of our children. Move the play area away from the street. Stock it with a greater variety of play equipment.
- **Outdoor spaces** need to provide areas to gather, meditate, socialize. Picnic tables, accessible gardens, fire pits, play areas are examples of spaces that could draw people to our campus on days other than Sundays. An inviting campus with appealing multi-functional areas could enhance the connections between WUU and the wider community.
- **Kitchen** needs to be larger with more workspace, commercial appliances (to permit cooking) and greater storage areas. Locate the kitchen near the fellowship hall, away from the sanctuary, to reduce noise. A larger commercial kitchen would provide many more opportunities to engage the wider community (WALT classes, auction, other WUU and community dinners, winter shelter program).
- **Technology** should be up to date and available in all WUU buildings. In case of overflow crowds on certain Sundays or other occasions, another area with audio-visual capability would allow those not seated in sanctuary to be part of the service or program. The AV control center should be located away from the storage area and with clear views of the sanctuary.
- **Restrooms** must be safe & accessible to all. Add a family friendly (non-gender specific) restroom.
- **Storage** areas must be located on the ground floor to be code compliant. Additional storage is needed for choir music, hymnals, musical equipment, chairs, tables, audio-visual and sound equipment, kitchen supplies and worship materials.
- **Library** location, size and purpose should be reconsidered. It should be appropriate for all ages and with more UU books available for children.
- **Offices** for staff need to be enlarged and moved closer to the main building.
- **WALT** is a great resource for introducing WUU to the larger community. Many of the classes in this program could be held here with an expanded facility.
- **Parking options and traffic flow** should be considered in any facilities expansion plans. At the same time, our green spaces must be preserved.

SUMMARY

Our programs and outreach have grown in the past twenty-five years. New technologies offer improved ways to communicate. Activities at WUU, as well as our commitment to serve the greater Williamsburg community, can be enhanced with some changes to our facilities as suggested in the bulleted items above. Any of these ideas can be applied using sustainable practices and energy conservation measures. This is in keeping with our responsibility as a Green Sanctuary Congregation.

SOME IMPORTANT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Question: Why did we do these Visioning Circles?

- ⊖ **Answer:** WUU has a history of interest in expansion. Our Visioning Circles added other voices to this interest and need to improve our facilities. Without asking basic questions in these Circles, we would not have known how limiting our facilities have become for many of our congregants, nor how special our sanctuary architecture and design are.

Question: Shouldn't we decide what we can afford first?

- **Answer:** No, it is far easier to decide what we can afford after we know what we envision. That is what this exploratory phase is all about.

Question: Why hire an architect to do preliminary plans?

- **Answer:** An architect will take our visioning work and meet with selected WUU groups (music, LFD, leadership team, board, social justice, AV, etc.) to clarify our needs. Then the architect will present design options, with cost estimates, to the congregation, which will then evaluate, discuss, and vote on whether to move ahead to the next stages.

Question: What will a financial feasibility study accomplish?

- **Answer:** It will enable a professional UUA consultant to lead an analysis of WUU's total ability to fund expansion. Then we can determine what we can afford to build and what adjustments we need to make to match our vision with our financial capability.

Question: Why should we build when many denominations have declining membership?

- ⊖ **Answer:** We are at or near capacity now. We want to give our parents and children the facilities we could not afford to build in 1995. And we know that Unitarian Universalism is one denomination that is growing.

Question: Why grow at all?

- **Answer:** We need to think about our purpose as a UU congregation. Why are we here? Is it to serve ourselves and to remain isolated from the greater local and global community? (That is not what our mission states.) Our space must enhance our mission while keeping our connection to the things we value.

Question: Why now?

- ⊖ **Answer:** We have waited nearly 20 years to complete the building process begun in 1995. Our congregation and finances are in good condition because:
 - Our two mortgages will be paid off by March 2015, offering the opportunity to assume additional debt.
 - We have started a three-year budget process that provides sufficient funding for upkeep and maintenance of our facilities.
 - We have followed suggestions of UUA consultants to complete a strategic planning process.

Question: How will we pay the estimated \$30,000 for the rest of this exploratory phase?

- **Answer:** One third of the funds have already been pledged for this phase, and there is a history of strong support from our congregants for special fund-raising such as this. These Exploratory Phase funds would not come from the WUU budget.

Question: What happens if we say no?

- **Answer:** Nothing will change. The limitations and handicaps of our facilities will still exist, and our children and families will still be separated from the rest of the congregation.