

Appendix 2

Research Subgroup Report

“Turn and face the strange ch ch changes”

The Research subgroup of the Futures Task Force defined our role and goal as helping to discern the religious and spiritual context that the church is operating in. We aimed to begin to understand the current place of mainline Christian congregations in urban settings and build a picture of what might lead to the continued health of our congregation and meaningful engagement with our community.

Summary of our Research, Findings and Recommendations

What we did in pursuit of our goal:

- * We read a variety of books on the status of and prospects for the church in the 21st century.
- * We explored the websites of a number of churches, mostly churches that appear to be thriving.
- * We spoke with ordained staff from two churches.
- * We met a number of times to share what we learned and turn our learning into meaningful insights as UCUC moves forward.

What we learned from our research:

- * The message is clear and consistent: change is afoot. We see that happening up close and personal in the changes among the churches within a few blocks of our building. And we see it to a lesser degree in the trends in our own membership, attendance and giving.
- * Fewer people are looking for conventional churches, for a variety of demographic, cultural, and generational reasons. The forms of denominations and church communities born out of the Reformation and long dominant in the U.S. are being stressed by a host of societal changes, including increased cultural diversity.
- * We are entering “The Age of the Spirit.” People are rejecting churches based primarily on adherence to belief statements (creeds, dogma, rules of inclusion and exclusion). The catchphrase “spiritual but not religious” is a sign of this shift. Many both inside and outside the church are longing for a faith that enables an encounter with the divine.
- * The positive experience of community and the felt experience of God/the Divine/Love will be the sign of authentic faith.
- * There is not one formula or model for a vital church. Regional and local contexts will require experimentation and adaptive responses from local church leadership and

congregations. The churches we looked at and talked to offered many options for worship, education and service. They also had strong media presence, from websites to radio and livestreaming TV.

What this means as we move forward:

- * Our mission must be clear and compelling so that those seeking service and social justice (public compassion) and those seeking community and spiritual experience (inner compassion) see and experience this in practice.
- * We will need to continue to provide and expand opportunities to help people experience God through spiritual practices (love of God) and acts of service (love of neighbor). Gathering Ground and our recent declaration to be a Racial Justice church are examples.
- * We will need to allow for/create more places of entry and levels and types of participation. This could include programs in many areas, including worship, education and service.
- * We must be aware of, be visible in, and connect with our community. We need to let the community know who we are, what we stand for, and what we do.
- * We must staff to support our current structure and programs; and with an eye toward how we see ourselves evolving. This could mean changes to the number of staff, full-versus part-time status and ordained versus lay.

Offered by the Research SubGroup:

Joan Davis
Kathy Kripps
Todd Smiedendorf
Bart Klingler