Report of Board Study of North Chapel Organizational and Financial Challenges

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Introduction

In February, we were asked by the North Chapel Board to address the question:

How does the North Chapel attract and engage more people in the activities and mission of the church, and garner adequate financial support in the process?

We agreed to look at the concerns underlying this question, gather information and suggestions from the congregation on how we might address these concerns, and bring recommendations for action back to the Board by May 2023.

As we began our study, the threat of COVID was ebbing but still present. Church attendance was low. Volunteers were few and far between. The Finance Committee predicted a deficit in 2023 of about $30,000.

To address these challenges, between February and May, we gathered information/feedback from the leadership council, seven focus groups and several individuals, totaling over fifty members of the North Chapel congregation. We also reviewed recent reports related to the question before us.

This report summarizes our findings about the situation the church faced at the start of our study (February 2023). It contains the strategies and suggestions we gathered to increase attraction and engagement of people in the church and ways to improve the church’s financial health. Finally, it reviews where things stand now and makes preliminary recommendations for next steps.

Our Starting Point

The North Chapel membership has been declining for years. The median age of the congregation is rising, and finding enough volunteers to help with the work of the church is often challenging. Our pledges, the Sunday collection, rentals, fundraising and gifts to the church are stable or falling, while our deficits are rising. Something needs to be done.

Feedback from the congregation made it clear that the church had a lot going for it. Many spoke of how the people in the church were a big reason they came. They were seen as different, bright, interesting, thoughtful; a community where one can get engaged, connect with one another, have fun. The social consciousness of the church was another attraction. A place that walks its talk, with a history of engaging the larger community around issues of social and environmental justice. Others cited the church’s history, the church building and grounds and the amazing staff.

We would like to acknowledge the help we got from Kathy Astemborski, Chris Bartlett, Jack Nelson and Ann Wynia and to thank all the participants who shared their thoughts and ideas about the future of NC.
At the same time, the apparent change in social attitudes towards church attendance, and the time demands on young families and children made the attraction of new members challenging. The perception was that “People aren’t going to church; busy with something else; engaged with other kinds of media and communication; busy with their kid’s activities, don’t have enough time left over for church.”

On the optimistic side, participants in our focus groups pointed out the local elementary school enrollment had grown during the pandemic and that these families may be looking for a church experience for themselves and their children. Others felt that there was a “deep desire (out there) for meaning and connection, maybe greater than ever (after the pandemic)” that would draw people to the North Chapel.

**Strategies for Change**

Before we summarize specific suggestions for ways to attract and engage people more fully in the church and its mission, we provide a series of broad strategies or approaches that came out of our internal conversations.

*Engagement has many forms.*

- **Within the Church.** As one participant put it: We need more and deeper engagement with amazing people. Sunday’s fun but it’s just snatches of contact while, for example, circle dinners provide more sustained opportunities for deeper connection. We need structures where we can get more of this kind of contact.

- **Between the church and the community.** Two parts: (1) engage church in larger community, build on and continue legacy of social concern and action (e.g., Sustainable Woodstock) and (2) engage larger community in more North Chapel activities. (e.g., auction; community dinners, musical events, talks)

*Time to try a bunch of new things,* anchored by the history of the church so not totally free rein. Evolution happens slowly making organisms more fit. It also can be very rapid explosive moments in time (e.g. meteor crash); maybe we’re in the latter now. Feels like a time to do things differently.

- **Coming out of the pandemic,** Do I want to consider a different set of activities than before the pandemic? I’m missing cross-generation ages; missing kids; ways to get to know children, missing meeting and knowing new people. Could the NC take a leading role in helping people get to know one another?

*Encourage social entrepreneurship.* This is the way young folks can express their energy; in a service or something else. Can we have a conversation with these folks, find out what energizes them and let them run with some of their ideas? For example, redesigning a Sunday service. Let’s find out what they would like to be involved in at the NC. Or, if some new people are adept in social media and in communications, invite them to critique the current format and content of North Chapel emails, posting on Woodstock listserv, Facebook and Instagram.

*Reach Out. Be proactive.* Find out what people are passionate about; recognize that, and figure out what they are doing with their time, and how to attract them into using some of their
precious time to further the goals of the church; Link folks up with projects that fit their passions. Time for a personal reach out; People like to be invited. Many don’t want to join a committee.

*Educate.* Let people know the history of NC; many new folks don’t have any idea; can’t assume anyone knows anything about NC anymore; this is who we are, what we’ve done. Put the history of NC on video.

*Provide more variety* to attract a greater variety of people. Different people offering reflections may attract new folks to the church. A broader array of music beyond the conventional hymns. Outdoor services. Mix it up. More PLAY. Promote very actively a few of the Sundays which have reflections and other things (such as special singing or dancing) that would appeal to new people. This is a valuable way to break the conventional image of the church which one suspects is that of a social club for old people.

*Reach out to other religious organizations* for ideas, support, and potential collaboration. What’s the secret of the evangelicals? Jewish Renewal (other kinds of music; diversity; attracting lots of people); music, food, full body experience; more than just the choir and singing psalms; The idea of broadening participation in events to include other congregations is a way to cross boundaries or barriers… *Any form of bridging differences, even slight ones, is a beginning and worth doing. It could start with identifying one representative from each congregation to meet and talk about the possibilities.*

*Celebrate what’s right and good* about the NC community in our considerations. As A R Ammons – A Tape for the Turn of the Year – puts it, “our existence is evidence of more than we can imagine; much we can’t see is working right, let’s celebrate that part of our ignorance and keep on until we learn better how to praise.”

**Attract, Engage, Connect, Support**

Conversations with congregants yielded scores of suggestions. We summarize these using a set of activities that suggest ways that folks could get involved in the North Chapel without necessarily joining a committee.

**Re-Engage the Congregation**

- need a kickoff-back from COVID; attract everyone there for special event; welcome back, here we are; an end of lockdown celebration, come for social, stay for the spiritual

*Let folks know we’re here and who we are.*

- A video about the North Chapel, a booth at the Farmers’ Market on the Green, information pamphlets at local B&Bs, updated Facebook page, open an Instagram account, advertise on the list serve, invite the community to join us.

**Offer Activities that Appeal to Different Groups.**

- Different people offering reflections may attract new folks to the church. More social justice speakers. A broader array of music beyond the conventional hymns. Outdoor services. Occasional special Sunday services for the community.
Make it Easier to Join Services

- Create an online presence, provide Zoom options for services and other activities, expand use of YouTube recordings.

More Welcoming Services

- Ring the bell, greet everyone as they enter, ask guests to share their names and where they’re from, include folks greeting one another in the opening, special cups for guests at coffee hour.

Attract and Engage Youth and Families

- Create a process involving kids, making new friends, gaining social skills, in addition to specific tasks, projects; maybe connect to kids from outside Woodstock. Invite children to play more of a role in the Sunday service (help with chalice lighting, storytelling with Leon, singing) and in church activities like the permaculture garden.
- Reach out to adolescents - grow our relationship with Change the World Kids, engage them more in church (community meals, soup program, pizza nights), invite them to participate in a service. Provide music and other events that attract younger people to the church; highlight social justice issues that are big for younger people.
- Create a process involving parents like inviting them to be on the board for three months; becoming a service coordinator. Make it easier for parents to participate in church activities, e.g. have SE end a little later so parents can come to coffee hour; have church or social justice projects that involve families/kids.

More Intergenerational Activities

- Create intergenerational groups, monthly intergenerational activities for kids and families in the backyard in warmer months, older members of the congregation help with SE, multigenerational hike up Mt Tom after the service.

More Conversations and Sharing

- Small group meetings with a specific focus: Human rights, women’s rights, climate etc. an opportunity to talk and share.
- Conversations. There’s a deep desire for meaning and connection, sharing stories with one another. More opportunities to share and listen like Amazing Grays, Covenant Groups; Moth Hour.

More Doing Things Together

- Projects where we work together such as Red Flannel Hash or Window Dressers; More activities like Barbara’s art group; Weekly walking groups.
- Restart weekly meditations in the chapel. Perhaps a weekly silent meditation/vigil for peace for all the peoples of the world who are suffering because of war and violence.
- Trips together to Star Island; Rent a house on Rye Beach for NC folks to come over for a day and enjoy themselves.
More Fun and Play

- Folks with funny hats; scavenger hunt; Game night at the church; movie night; Moth Hour, Charades, Truth and Lie

More Doing Things with Others

- Bridging with other religious organizations (within and outside UU churches); Join with other congregations on social justice issues; perhaps speaker series in alternating locations; monthly gatherings on a topic that expands our awareness beyond this community and/or offers other perspectives.

More Social Justice Activities

- have a high-profile lecture series, fit with NC social mission, raise the profile of the church; could cover gun violence, immigration, other issues; have social justice movie series.

Become More Informed

- Newcomer’s classes – History of UU and of our Woodstock Church. What is our theology? Handout of church history. Perhaps NC Video. Stories of how people got connected to the church. Make our principles better known.
- Put up a bulletin board in the foyer to let people know what is going on. Update bulletin board in social hall. Pictures of board and committee members. Make a collage of people doing things at church. Photos are great!
- Explain to new members things older members take for granted. Pledging, covenant groups, circle dinners etc.

More Coming Together around Music

- Promote quality of sanctuary and piano for musical events; Bring back music series, interplay jazz, singing groups; Draw on local music resources (e.g. Michael Zsoldos)
- Use musical events to attract younger people; Have a singalong. Invite people to bring an instrument. Could be after church or a potluck or around the fire pit in the evening.

More Coming Together Around Food

- Potlucks, coffee hour, circle dinners, brown bag lunches weekly in the gazebo; Bring a picnic lunch on Sunday and eat in the backyard. Place for kids to play. Perhaps a Mothers’ Day Dinner, 4th of July Barbecue
- Pizza nights would draw us, our kids, the social aspect is important for connecting; If we build it, they will come.
- Ken Woodhead’s soup – A bigger lure than coffee hour. Soup after services. Soup for those in need
• Wednesday Night dinners are great, bring in community, parents, grandparents as well as Change the World Kids, a good time working in the kitchen, and builds connections. How about Thursday night dinners for the community as we did in the past?

Easier Ways to Support the Church

• Improve the online payment system. Simplify. Update Paypal or Venmo to encourage, and make it easy, for online viewers to contribute; monthly online payment from checking accounts rather than Paypal; People often don’t carry cash. Could we have a Venmo link on the Order of Service?

More Effort Raising Revenues

• Make the pledge drive more engaging and fun; perhaps connect to a dinner event as we did in the past; start planning earlier.
• More rental use of the building brings in new people and generates energy. Make the community more aware that the church has rental space available.
• Look for new ways to fundraise. See what younger people are doing; What about a benefit concert with Eugene Freisen? Why not a fundraiser for specific projects like the kitchen? More food events, like Red Flannel Hash, can bring in money. Music events?
• Complete Endowment Fund campaign, raise to $500K.
• Seek longer term grants for operational funding from local foundations concerned about building and sustaining community infrastructure and resilience; Put history of NC on video to use in fundraising.

More Attention to Costs

• On the expense side, church and non-personnel administrative costs offer some possibilities for reduction; other expenses are relatively small and are already trending down.
• Monitor personnel expenses (wages, salaries, benefits) since they represent three-quarters of the budget.

Some Positive Developments

• The ebbing of the pandemic, with its accompanying loosening of COVID requirements. Both church attendance and the number of children in SE has increased.
• Along with this, there has been an exciting increase in church membership. 20 new members
• Pledges were budgeted at $120,000. In January only 59 people had pledged. Currently we have 74 pledges for $126,877. Fundraising is already almost $2000 above the 2023 budget. Rental income was $5000 in the 2023 budget. As of mid-May our rental income was around $3500.
• Treasurer Ann Wynia is cautiously optimistic about reductions in projected 2023 deficit.
• Still need to remain vigilant and plan ahead (especially for Leon’s six-month sabbatical in 2024?).
• Structural deficit will remain unless membership continues to grow and pledges grow along with membership, and efforts to expand other revenues and control costs continue and are successful.

Next Steps?

• We need to establish priorities for action; activities to highlight as we move ahead.
• Increase the willingness of members to take on short term projects as well as longer term committee commitments.
• Create ways for people to get together. Particularly hearing the ideas of our newer members. Invite them to join us, rather than waiting for them to volunteer.
• Establish a tighter monitoring process for revenues and costs, including identifying progress metrics (membership levels, attendance levels, major revenue and costs) and targets, and steps that need to be taken if targets aren’t met.