**Committee on Shared Ministry**

**Assessment of Communications Effectiveness**

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**Background**

First Unitarian Church of Oakland is working to become a more functional program church by adopting clearer and more formalized processes, including communications processes, to support our health and growth.

Especially with ministerial search under way, it’s critical that our Website and other communications function well, both individually and as a system.

The Committee on Shared Ministry looked at whether communications channels are “pervasive”, “timely”, and of “quality”, as well as if they “motivate” congregants and potential members to participate in programs and activities (per Robert Latham, Moving on from Church Folly Lane, see Appendix).

In doing this assessment, we were mindful that in today’s information-overloaded and time-pressed world, it is hard for *any* communications to be effective, especially communications from a largely volunteer nonprofit. We offer respect and gratitude to the many people whose hard work and dedication goes into First Unitarian’s communications.

**Objectives**

Support the growth and organizational health of First Unitarian Church of Oakland in order to support its mission and vision by

* Understanding how communications currently support people in connecting and deepening their relationship with the church and church community
* Recommending ways communications might be more effective in helping to
* grow membership
* deepen relationships of ongoing members with the church and church community

**Key Audiences**

* **Ongoing members** – People who attend regularly or somewhat regularly. They have some sense of what’s going on, but need information about programs they either know well or want to start learning about.
* **Church shoppers** -- people who have not yet attended a service. They want to understand what FUCO is about, whether it might be a good fit for them and logistics of attendance.
* **New people** -- people who have visited and like the church. They may or may not be members. They are looking for ways to connect in.

Note: This report did not address communications to other churches, the broader community, etc.

**Methodologies**

1. Survey of 61 ongoing members, in-person at services in January and February, and online in April and May. (See Appendix for complete data and quotes)

2. Individual interviews with a half-dozen young adults and new members/attendees

3. Staff and volunteer interviews

* Staff -- Venee, Amanda
* Volunteers -- Michael Fitzhugh (Webmaster), Jodie Mathies (welcome team), Clark Sanford (Website volunteer), Maria Bayliss (first-time visitor caller), Lanie Peterson (head of YA group), Carol Wood (Sunday greeter)

**Communication channels assessed**

* Chalice Chatter
* UUOakland.org
* Pulpit announcements
* Printed order-of-service announcements
* Facebook uuoakland page
* Facebook young adults page
* Visitor packet, Visitor Connect card
* New member packet
* Flyers
* Phone calls to first-time visitors
* Post-service orientations

**Summary findings**

**Communications are basically effective**. Especially for an organization with a lean staff and many important functions, like the Website, run largely by volunteers, FUCO communications are doing a good job. However, there are ways they can be improved that are detailed below and in the accompanying Website report.

**Multiple communications channels are necessary**. Different people engage in different ways and many people want multiple touches. The Website, Chalice Chatter, pulpit announcements, list serve, etc. each play an important role in keeping people informed, connected and up to date. We should try to optimize the performance of each channel while maintaining the good mix we have now.

**Many shoppers and new members have specific interests** and are looking to connect with people who share those interests. FUCO could do a better job of messaging and outreach to some of these groups, particularly Young Adults.

**The Website** is the most important communications tool for church shoppers, so is critical to bringing in new members. While it is attractive and effective in many ways, it suffers from the lack of one “conductor” among the orchestra of staff and volunteers that put it together. The site content lacks consistency and coherency, with too many broken links and out-of-date information. It needs firmer oversight.

**Recommendations**

**Website (**Please see separate Website assessment for more details**)**

* Needs one administrator to take responsibility for creating a seamless site experience despite the many hands involved. One eye needs to regularly solve for consistency, coherency, updates etc.
* Calendar should be even more comprehensive and up to date for people looking for meetings and programs beyond Sunday services.
* Add a comprehensive list of FUCO programs and activities similar to the programs list in the new member packet so new visitors can see the breadth and depth of activities.
* Home page carousel images are great, but add Young Adults (YA) so they feel represented

**Church directory**

* Clarify instructions or design directory to be more intuitive to use
* Encourage new (and ongoing) members to sign up for the directory and upload a head shot

**Pulpit announcements**

Continue -- this is an important communications channel. Rotating the entire board for announcements is appreciated. Support YA by announcing YA events.

**Chalice Chatter**

Doing a good job. Highly relied upon. Don’t fix what ain’t broke.

**List Serve**

Add list serve sign-up info (uuoakland-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) to the New Member packet

**Visitor Packet and Connect card**

* Include Young Adult information so YA visitors know about our programs
* Add a check-box for YAs on the Connect card and send YA shopper contact info to the YA program lead
* Ensure the dots are connected between all of peoples’ expressed interests and follow-up communications (family, activism etc.)

**New visitor phone calls**

Visitors LOVE these. Continue making calls that are welcoming, offering to answer questions, and not pushy.

**Printed orders of service**

Continue offering 10 or so each Sunday at services.

**Post-service orientations**

Offer these more consistently. People like this idea but nobody interviewed had had the opportunity.

**Flyers**

Continue using flyers in Wente re. events etc. They are effective.

**Coffee hour**

Consider a “buddy” approach or other ways to make it less intimidating for new folks

**Facebook**

Time permitting, people would appreciate a comprehensive feed including photos from programs and event listings beyond Sunday services announcements

**Ongoing members findings**

We found that current members have the following questions that most need to be answered by communications:

* What is happening at Sunday services? What time are services this week?
* What events are happening after and before services? Or at other times?
* I’m involved in Program X. When and where is the next meeting?
* I’m interested in Program Y. What is it, when and where does it happen, who do I reach for more info?
* How do I reach a minister or staff member?
* How do I reach another church member?
* Where can I see/share photos/posts about an event I attended?

**Communications effectiveness for ongoing members**

More than half of ongoing members feel well informed about church news and events – 56% said they feel well formed, 31% said “there are some things I’m not clear about” and 11% don’t feel well informed. We consider these fairly strong results given how hard it is for any communications to achieve breakthrough in our noisy, busy world.

The primary way that ongoing members stay informed is through **Chalice Chatter**. Second is **word of mouth** -- talking or emailing with other people, especially people involved in the same church programs. Many ongoing members also mentioned **pulpit announcements** as important.

The **Website** is used on an as-needed basis, rather than read regularly by most people as their primary resource for church news and information. This is normal in digital communications – people engage more with push notifications like emails and use Web sites for specific questions and needs.

Detailed findings and recommendations re. uuoakland.org are in a separate **Website** report prepared in conjunction with this one.

There is minimal need for a **printed order of service**. A greeter reported that she receives perhaps 10 copies to hand out at Sunday services and that is adequate.

The **Community Connections Team** is doing an admirable job connecting with first-time visitors. The **Connect! Card** now includes the ability for the new person to request being placed on Chalice Chatter. It also includes the ability to ask for more information on church programs.

**Church shopper/new attendee findings**

We found these are the key questions Church Shoppers rely on FUCO communications to answer

* What are the mission, vision and values of this organization?
* Who are the leaders?
* What sort of people are part of this community?
* What is Unitarian Universalism?
* What do people who know First Unitarian say about it?
* Does it have programs I’m interested in?
* What sorts of events and activities does it sponsor?
* When are services? What should I expect?
* How do I reach someone to answer a question in advance of attending?

**Communications effectiveness for church shoppers/new attendees**

Who are FUCO shoppers/new attendees?

* All were seeking a community of shared values.
* Many were seeking other people in their demographic, especially young adults and families.
* Many shoppers seemed to be experiencing a life milestone, specifically 1. people who had just moved to the area and 2. people starting families.
* All of the shoppers and new members interviewed appeared to be in their 20s and 30s. Interviewees were a combination of single, coupled, and young families.

*“I tried UU churches in Philly and Chicago. When moving here I thought I wanted to, for first time, put down roots and truly prioritize community.”*

*“When we first came we were thinking about starting a family. We want a community of shared values for the baby to grow up in.”*

* Most or all shoppers were already familiar with Unitarianism and seeking a Unitarian church. They weren’t considering other denominations.
* Oakland dwellers gravitated toward FUCO rather than neighboring UU churches.
* One person formed a positive impression from seeing UU Oakland in action in the community.
* A Starr King student heard about us through word of mouth.

Getting “plugged in”

* In general, church communications are doing good job of educating shoppers and new members/attendees about UU Oakland and attracting people to services.
* In terms of the joining process, most interviewees reported choosing to “test the waters” for a few months, attending sporadically for a period as they familiarized themselves with UU Oakland while also leading busy lives.
* Strong feelings of connectedness to First Unitarian built gradually as they learned more and felt their way into the community. They appreciated being given space to explore without pressure to join.
* It takes people awhile to get fully plugged in to what’s happening and confident they know what’s going on. The longer they attend, the more plugged in and knowledgeable about church communications and activities they are.
* New parents are very challenged to keep track of church announcements, but are eager to connect with other families.
* Young adults crave connectedness with other young adults. They look for other YA on the web site and in church visits.
* Welcome calls and emails (especially calls) are very effective outreach for first-time visitors.

Most interviewees said they felt like they knew what was going on after they had attended services a few times and started paying attention to the Chalice Chatter.

*“I feel like I’m pretty plugged in to what interests me”* – attendee who had been coming regularly for three months

Website

* Every shopper or new member/attendee looked at uuoakland.org before visiting the first time and formed a positive impression of church from the Website.
* The calendar was useful for knowing the time and content of Sunday services and starting to understand what events and programs First Unitarian offers.
* It was important to see diversity and inclusion among clergy and members represented on the Web site. The site does a good job of this.

“I was inspired by the fact that there’s a black minister, even though it’s basically a white space” – new YA attendee

* Shoppers and new members wanted to see special areas of interest such as new families, young adults and social justice.
* Young adults did not feel represented on the Website and were not able to find YA activities or sign up for YA information.
* Ideally more photos of young adults should appear prominently on the Web site and young adult activities and sign-ups should be easy to find.
* Few new attendees seem to know about the church directory. One new YA member (echoing veteran members) reported looking at the directory online and said, “it seems complicated, so I haven’t done it.”

First church experience

* People reported receiving positive first impressions from: inspiring ministers, an emotionally moving service, friendly congregants, the beautiful space.
* It was important to see the church embodying progressive values through diversity, inclusion, vulnerability, and spiritual exploration.
* People commented that they enjoyed being surprised by services, and loved the sense of discovery from doing something new, such as a “hand dance” led by Rev. Sheri on one person’s first visit. “It felt like it gave space for spirituality to be explored.”

*“I appreciated how welcoming everyone was and the spirit of social justice activism. At the time, Pastor Jaqueline was there. She struck me as magnetic personality, a special leader.”*

*“My first visit during Black History Month left very positive impression.”*

 *“The first time I came, Michelle Ma gave a talk on Pride Sunday. Because of her, I wanted to invest my time and I stayed.”*

*“I loved the space. I enjoyed the space.”*

* Several young people reported being put off by what they saw as an “older, white space.” Once they were able to meet young adults, such as at coffee hour, they felt more comfortable. However, less racial diversity than expected and desired was still seen as a negative.
* One person suggested First Unitarian ask first-time visitors to stand and say their name as the SF UU church does. Others preferred to have less attention on them and more space to experience church on their own terms.

New visitor orientation/Tour

* No interviewees attended a service when the visitor orientation was offered after church. All said they would have been very interested in doing it.

Coffee hour

Some people welcomed the chance to get to know the community informally at coffee hour, although most reported feeling shy, awkward and hesitant to attend. Those who stayed reported positive experiences.

One young woman had attended services several times, but hadn’t yet worked up the courage to mingle in Wente.

Another said, *“I wouldn’t have gone in if my mom wasn’t there forcing me – I’m too shy. But I met Sheri’s wife and it was like she just wanted to gobble me up. She wanted to know all about me and we talked about common interests. I walked away feeling really moved by the amount of connection that was so instant.”*

Welcome phone calls and emails

Welcome phone calls after a first visit made an extremely positive impression on most interviewees, even those who listened to the message rather than picking up the call.

*“It surprised me in a positive way. I felt like, ‘Wow this church might want me as a member.’ It’s a cool way to make a connection that’s more personal than an email.”*

*“The lady who called told us that First Unitarian is a vibrant, anti-oppressive community. That’s what I remember. It was neutral to slightly good to get the call. Good because I was looking to join a new community, but neutral because I wanted to keep a low profile at first.”*

*“As a person who didn’t grow up in church, I think a softer touch worked best for me. There was no pressure to do anything, just an opportunity to ask questions. A more aggressive approach might have turned me off.”*

*“I didn’t get a call, but I would have liked it. You get bombarded by emails these days.”*

*“The most effective email I got was a personal email from Nicole about a young family clothing swap. We felt like, ‘Wow, someone took notice of us’, and appreciated her reaching out. We’d really like to meet other young families, but we’re not getting any additional family info.”*

Visitor packet, Connect card

Most people are happy to fill out the visitor connect card, although sometimes they wait until after a few visits to do so. Most receive follow-up communications, which they appreciate. One person reported that he got no response to his connect card.

People appreciate the comprehensive program flyer from Rev. Sheri, and starting to receive the Chalice Chatter.

It’s important for people to be able to check off their interests (like young family) and then start getting information about it.

Young adults do not have a check box on the visitor connect card.

In July one new attendee couple asked when the second service was. They had picked up a packet in the pews, and it listed 2 services. We should insure that all the material we disseminate is up-to-date.

YA information in the visitor packet is critical to encourage YA visitors to stay connected. They should be able to sign up to receive emails, texts, and Facebook notifications from the YA group, and understand what activities and community are available via the First Unitarian YA group.

Chalice Chatter

New members seem to be getting automatically added to Chalice Chatter, which they appreciate. Kudos for improving this process. People who joined several years ago didn’t start getting CC right away. One said he didn’t know about it for two years.

New members and attendees don’t necessarily pay much attention to Chalice Chatter until they have been to church a few times and are starting to feel a nice connection. Then it can become an important source of information.

Some people report feeling overwhelmed by email in general. Some say they ignore digital communications, but others check email often and highly value Chalice Chatter.

*“I feel very knowledgeable about what’s going on at church, a 9 out of 10. I look forward to receiving the Chalice Chatter. I’m really happy to see it improve over the last year. The information is concise, it’s colorful and it’s easy to see the different sections. You can easily identify which event is being talked about because of the icons and border designs. I think it’s very accessible, and it’s my primary way of learning about events, as well as pulpit announcements. I no longer use the paper program, I rely on Chalice Chatter.”*

It’s important that Chalice Chatter continue to be pushed out each week to keep people mindful of First Unitarian and educated about events and news.

List serve

Unlike Chalice Chatter, new members/attendees don’t seem to have a natural way to get on the Yahoo Group list serve.

They learn about it through word of mouth, sometimes years after starting church.

Pulpit announcements

Pulpit announcements were widely cited as a very important way to feel connected to the church community and hear important announcements about people and programs.

*“Pulpit announcements are great for sure. That’s how I learned about Beloved Conversations.”*

*“I like that additional members of the Board are now making announcements. It’s important we see them and know who they are.”*

Flyers

Flyers, often handed out during coffee hour, are important sources of information. Although they were cited less often than other communications channels, many people use them.

*“Digital is less effective for me, whereas a flyer really caught my attention.” -- YA*

Facebook

Currently Facebook’s UUOakland account is only used to push out templated information about Sunday services. Members would like to see more announcements, news, sharing of photos from events etc. (Young adults have their own Facebook page – see below.)

*“It would be nice to get reminders for things like the annual meeting via Facebook. I like getting multiple reminders through multiple channels.”*

**Young adult findings**

* Young adults use the same means as older adults to stay abreast of the news, including Chalice Chatter, uuoakland.org, pulpit announcements, word of mouth, and flyers.
* They appear to use the Yahoo Groups list serve less than older adults.
* None mentioned or seem to use or care about the paper bulletins/announcements handed out at the start of services.
* In addition to church-wide media, Young Adults use their own channels for YA get-togethers and announcements.
* YA lead Lanie Peterson has started a texting group she uses to keep YAs apprised of social and other events.
* YA also have an active FB group where they post events.
* Lanie has printed business cards with all contact info for giving out to YAs.
* Lanie is working largely on her own to provide information to visiting Young Adults

Instagram

Two young adult members said they are more likely to use Instagram than Facebook and would like First Unitarian to use Instagram.

One young adult said he considers Facebook “creepy” and would prefer a more secure platform for sharing.

**APPENDIX**

Robert Latham, Moving On From Church Folly Lane, points out that in a Program church, “There must be a pervasive system of communication” that reaches everyone in the community. He defines an “effective communications system” as one that:

* Motivates commitment above competing claims for energy and time.
* Is timely in that it is an immediate reminder of opportunities for busy and burdened people.
* Is expressed in a form of quality that reminds of the seriousness of the congregation’s mission. (p.174)

**Communications Survey Data**

The first question on the survey is, “What is a primary way you get news about events and other information you need about the church?”

54% of the respondents said their number one source was Chalice Chatter. It was the 1st or 2nd way of getting info of 61% of people.

The second highest response on the main way they got information about the church was ”Word of Mouth”–28%.

The third most common way of staying informed was the unofficial Listserve – 15%.

The second question concerned how often people look at the church website.

53% said they looked at the site “as needed”.

23% said that they looked at it once a month.

47% responded to the Third question that they found the website, ”Confusing, but I can find some things that I need.”Question #4 – How well-informed do feel about Church news and events?

56% said that they felt they were well-informed how about the church and church events.

31% said that “There are things that I am not clear about.”

11% said that they were not well informed

**Quotes from Congregants and Attendees On Church Communications**

I have never been able to get into and use the online directory.  Don't know why, tried a few times and mentioned it to a couple of people who I thought could help, but no.

The phone message machine for the office (which I called today) doesn't have Venee's name in the directory and there seemed to be no way to talk to anyone when I called, twice.  The message is VERY long.

It's hard to know sometimes where a group is meeting and I think that's because they haven't heard back from Stefan.  At one point there was a calendar on the website with groups and rooms used.  Maybe that's the solution?

Link to the Facebook page from the Website and vice versa.

It's pretty obvious that communications is not a coordinated activity with dedicated leadership. For example, other not for profits that we're involved in use print, websites, phone calls, and email blasts to announce events, communicate regularly about projects, give information about staff, facilities, finances, etc.  Effective organizations think about what is urgent, what is important, put together campaigns, as opposed to one offs, decide about messaging strategies, figure out how often to contact people for different types of recurring information.

Other UU churches we've been in offer recordings of sermons and music in hard copies and on websites.

Speaking of websites, our shows its volunteer characteristics.

It also appears that the database of members and friends is not well-managed.  We were members for three years before our change of address was processed.  The church's database of friends and members is a very valuable asset and should be treated as such.

Re-reading the above sounds pretty harsh.  I don't mean to denigrate those who work hard to communicate.  It just seems that given the importance of effective communication, the church could make it a priority.

First thing is that the website needs to be redesigned.  The kind of things someone comes to the website to find out should be right up front and obvious: such as - What are the next few services, when do they start and end, is there coffee hour or potluck, where is the church and where do you park.  Let's give people the impression that we want them to visit.  Other upcoming congregant activities should be listed (not the facilities use calendar) and ideally the calendar has a description and contact information for each activity.  And if we are having an auction, congregational meeting, party, concert or something like that, it should be on the front page.  We have to sell ourselves.  We have to make it easy to understand how to get involved, what is happening, when, how to help or donate or find out more about anything. Beyond the Website, I think the same approach to making information organized, obvious, and easy, should apply to bulletin boards, flyers, announcements etc.  In the Chalice Chatter how about listing all the events on only one or two lines each so they ALL show up in the initial email, and if you want to know more you click to open up an item? As it is now, if your event is towards the bottom of the list almost no one will see it because they won't know it's there.

It’s essential for non-web folks and new people to have a paper worship guide available.

It needs to be clear on the website, and or other places about how to join a covenant group.

I am old-fashioned and prefer not to use the Internet. When I do sometimes events have already passed.

I miss the printed order service, with an announcement list available as a handout. This sentiment was expressed by over 10% of the respondents.

I think we need an updated directory with photos of numbers.

Fix broken links on the website. Fix the incorrect section headers on website. Don’t move this Sunday’s service to “archives” until Monday.

I suggest: editing the yellow visitors card to include the JTW and TOC meetings and potluck so new COC have an immediate contact, and allies have an important road forward supporting that committee. A poster at the entrance to the service before the Sunday of any events - for people who have trouble with Chalice Chatter access, or need reminders.

I spoke with a table of Young adults and Young adults new to the church. They say that they most often communicate among themselves by texting to inform each other about church. They also use Facebook. There are a few of the young adults that do the posting on Facebook. One complaint from a new member was that the website sometimes has links for “more”, but when you click that link there is no ”more”. The same person also said that the website was informative enough that it brought her to the service.

I think getting information out through all venues is a good practice.

Please add information about the people who are leading/managing programs. For example, covenant group coordinators.

“I feel like I’m pretty plugged into the things I want to be plugged into.”

I go on the web site if Chalice Chatter is taking too long and I just want to know what the service will be about. And I like to see what groups are meeting and when, so I do like the calendars.

Directory is confusing, as is jot form for announcements.