

Conflict Consultation with East Shore Unitarian Church February 15, 2018

The Revs. Christine Robinson and Jonipher Kwong

Introduction

We were invited by the Board to assist with a simmering conflict that seemed at first to be between the current leadership (Board/Staff) and some older, former leaders of the church; a pretty standard congregational flash point. Christine brings nearly 40 years of experience leading growing/large UU congregations while Jonipher's 15-year ministry has been with small to mid-sized congregations. He has been on regional staff for 3 years, specializing in leadership development and multicultural transformation. Our work is made possible by the Pacific Western Region of our UUA. *We offer you these recommendations to freely use as you, in your democratic processes, think best. No one can force this church to do any of these things!*

What We Did

- Held virtual meetings with over 120 members of 3-7 persons each.
- Reviewed documents: policies, board packets, exit interviews, etc.
- Talked to the Staff and Board as well as two groups that were demographically underrepresented in the meetings: RE Parents, and People of Color
- Consulted with various UUA staff.
- We also experienced the congregation and its culture for ourselves as we interacted with staff, leaders, and members.

This is a well-used and often successful consultation process which follows a slightly different path with each congregation and is very reliant on listening and intuition. It is **not** social science! We know that we heard from the most upset, most angry, most worried and most dedicated members of your congregation. We assume that the majority of the congregation is content.

Our Impressions

1. This is a congregation which has dealt with high levels of stress and change for at least 25 years and particularly the last 3. We urge you to slow down and take care of yourselves.
2. It appears to us that both the pool of "combatants" and "unhappy" is uncomfortably large, causing damage to the congregation. We also think this was caught in time and you will return to good health.
3. We did not find this to be a simple conflict with two, well-defined sides. Trust has eroded over the years due to a wide range of reasons, demographics and causes which are creating something more like a "miserable amoeba." We invite you to quit looking for simple causes and quick fixes and focus on the difficult adaptive work of real engagement and cultural change.
4. This appears to be a system which subtly encourages, or at least is helpless around behavior that in most congregations would be considered attention-getting, uncivil, untruthful, or out of covenant. (see #3 below)
5. We came to admire this congregation's "keep it going" attitude and dedication to the good of the congregation even when we wished we could redirect it. You have a lot going for you and a lot of good comes out of your congregation every day. We think you can plough through this hard time and come out stronger.

Recommendations

1. Your next minister should come out of the Developmental Ministry Program

While most of you indicated you are eager to have another settled minister, the last thing you need is an “unintentional” interim because of the lingering conflict. What we recommend instead is the Developmental Ministry program, in which the minister can stay for up to 7 years, giving them time to instill some cultural shifts based on up to 5 Developmental Goals you come up with. You will have to work with the Board to figure out timing. This then becomes a three-way relationship with the Region.

2. Build trust: get to know each other as people instead of factions

Most congregations fortunate/skillful enough to last >50 years are divided between “old timers,” “current leaders,” and “newcomers.” When those categories become “sides,” as they have here, it is time for people to get to know each other across boundaries and find our common identity as UUs. This has a marked effect on damping down conflict and fostering trust and civility.

3. Step up your work on Right Relations

You began the work of drawing boundaries and articulating what is acceptable behavior or not. This work should result in policies and procedures that are well publicized. Right Relations also includes the informal ways that congregations hold each other accountable for such community-building skills as truth-telling, refraining from gossip, undermining legitimate authority, and applying to ourselves the same standards we expect of others. Living into covenant is a great way to build trust.

4. Continue to Work on Your Governance Structures

This congregation is too large to govern itself with small congregation governance methods! There is a critical difference between *Governance*, which is by nature structured and precise, and *Management* which can (and usually should) be collaborative and friendly. This is a big, multi-year effort, but well worth it. Educate yourself in various ways and consider getting a consultant to guide your work.

5. Pay Much More Attention to Communication!

Poor communications exacerbate congregational stress, good communications practices have changed a lot in the last generation. You probably need more staff time and training here.

6. Think of Fulfilling Your Mission like Going to a Potluck

Imagine the four pillars in your Mission Statement as potluck items. Let people bring the “dish” they want, sample the “foods” they like, and skip over the “pots” that won’t appeal to them. This means that attendees will hear about but not be required to believe, agree with, or like some of the things that go on in your congregation, just as not everyone likes or even approves of everything on offer at a potluck. Begin to think in both/and rather than either/or.

In Conclusion

We live in highly anxious times, creating a “perfect storm” within ESUC. Focusing on your mission to “practice love, explore spirituality, build community, and promote justice” will allow you to face these challenges head-on and turn them into opportunities. The work you have done to confront oppressions while shoring up your spiritual resources can be used to model what civility looks like in our polarized society. We believe in your potential for transformation as you work through this conflict. Blessings on your journey.