

Breaking Through in New Jersey – The Unitarian Church in Summit

Becoming a Breakthrough Congregation came as a surprise to us. It felt like we just kept doing what we needed to do, paying attention to the challenges under our noses, listening to folks who pushed us to risk and experiment and then one day we looked in the mirror and we had made some significant strides!

Several developments have marked that journey: We have experienced a steady and gradual increase in membership that has amounted to a 20% increase in adults in the past five years, and especially in the area of Children's Religious Education, where attendance has increased an incredible 65% over that same period. At the same time, about five years ago, the congregation responded to a sermon that said their purpose was "to equip people for bold living." The goal is to liberate people to do ministry and explore the forms that takes for them. As a result, we are constantly working on permission-giving structures and policies, pushing hard against the challenging program-to-corporate shift change, with the increased generosity and church governance changes required to staff up to that next level. Last year, UCS passed a deficit budget to take the Religious Director full-time so that we could add a structured, tiered adult religious education program, and continue to fund a half-time minister focused entirely on Youth Ministry. Currently, the focus is on a chief administrative officer/business manager and a capital campaign to alleviate space issues. There is vision and a willingness to take risks that is exciting and so far has paid off in interesting ways that might challenge other UUs.

Some of ways UCS has nurtured its own religious community include:

- A strong and active Lifespan Faith Development Program for children and adults. That includes a dedicated staff for adult programming that has longevity working together, a strong commitment to youth and coming of age that has fostered a youth group of 60 members not all of whom are drawn from the church community and worship and community events that are fun, creative, and challenging to our staff and members.
- A strong identity with social justice work from supporting interfaith and GLBTI issues, taking the lead on affordable housing issues in Summit, piloting the "Building the World We Dream" curriculum and establishing a new racial justice task force (which right now is working on an archives project while they prepare to welcome Mark Morrison Reed for a weekend that includes a look into the congregation's history around race as well as the place of ritual in UU life).

UCS has maintained a bold outreach programmng even in tough times. This has probably been the most marked the last five years. Among the ways The Unitarian Church has lived our values boldly over the last five years are:

- Celebrating our 100th anniversary with a Centennial Campaign that set out to raise \$100,000 (and raised 90% of that amount) to give away, half nationally and half internationally, largely to education initiatives. This campaign included a challenge to everyone to do 100 hours of service, and a trip to New Orleans that took 35 adults to the efforts organized through our local congregations in that city.

- Partnering with an elementary school in nearby Irvington where over 90% of the students are on subsidized meals. UCS volunteers serve at the behest of the principal and her staff and have done everything from landscaping to stress reduction workshops to a regular tutoring program – whatever is asked.
- Continuing to host the homeless for two to four weeks each year and paying for a year of transitional housing and supportive services for a family moving to settled living.
- Supporting food banks struggling with increased demand and diminished donations, with food and \$15,000 in a single year (not in its Centennial fund-raising).
- Providing the funding to build a women’s shelter in Darfur
- Leading the interfaith community’s effort to drive the building of six units of affordable housing (with Habitat for Humanity) in Summit, and helping to raise the \$300,000 from the interfaith community and local civic organizations that Summit’s City Council charged them to raise.

UCS is constantly asking what growth requires of the congregation as an institution, what builds health and strength in the congregation, what ways we can live our values, and what experiments and bold choices are out there as we chart our way in this building toward strength. All of this happens within strict space constraints that would seem to make growth all but impossible, but creates a spirit of meaning and adventure that seems to be what our folks come looking for and enjoy being part of.

Rev. Vanessa Southern
Minister

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President