



CHURCH OF THE LARGER FELLOWSHIP BEACON OF LIBERAL FAITH

November 1, 2010

The Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) faces an extraordinary opportunity to reach thousands and thousands of people who resonate with Unitarian Universalism's saving message of love and hope. In order to do this best, we are revisiting, revising and renewing our mission, vision and strategy. This paper is a *preliminary* articulation of a plan to guide us during the next three years of service. We are inviting a small group of stakeholders and advisors for substantive feedback and reflection.

We want your candid insights and reactions to this early statement of organizational vision and strategy. Because we greatly value your opinion, we would deeply appreciate your assistance as we move forward into strategic planning.

VISION

The CLF can be an engine that drives substantial growth in the movement by reaching out to spiritually hungry individuals: Thousands more people could be exposed to and embrace Unitarian Universalism. The internet, with ever-evolving social media, makes such outreach a real possibility, and plays to our strengths as cultural creatives. There has never been a better environment to share our saving message of love and hope.

- Imagine an online sanctuary for our faith that is lively, interactive, persistently visible and compelling to people all over the world.
- Imagine the best of the spiritual resources which our movement offers, easily accessible and visually engaging.
- Imagine all the positive ways in which Unitarian Universalism's core principles might "go viral."

CLF—MISSION AND HISTORY

Since its inception, despite twists, turns and evolution, the CLF's fundamental purpose—to serve as a Beacon of Liberal Faith—has remained unchanged. The CLF's primary purpose remains to introduce Unitarian Universalism to the uninitiated, and to serve as a resource for individuals who seek spiritual community with us. What *has* changed are the opportunities, strategies, tactics, technologies and vehicles for communication and outreach presented by the character of this moment.

With roots going all the way back to the 1800's when ponies helped deliver missives to far-flung free thinkers, in the 1950's the CLF charge was to meet with geographically clustered CLF members, creating local congregations whenever possible. More than 400 UU congregations were established as a result. CLF members have always been regular people, doing their best to live their liberal religious values: they raise their children using CLF materials, they reach out to do their part in the world, and they try to live their best lives. This is what the CLF exists to do: to create and nourish Unitarian Universalism across every sort of barrier, obstacle, and frontier imaginable.

While many of those benefitting from the CLF are already Unitarian Universalists, a significant number of those whom the CLF reaches are new to or even unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism. Yet even without the

immediate camaraderie and friendships that often come from joining a bricks and mortar congregation, many of the people who come to the CLF also experience that sudden and satisfying spiritual sense of having come home again, maybe even for the very first time.

These days, we are proud that 3,500 people across the world identify as CLF members. The CLF ministries embrace all sorts--adults, families, young adults, prisoners, and military personnel. A small staff, including the Senior Minister, provides pastoral counseling and support to many Unitarian Universalists including religious professionals and their families. The CLF communicates with members and faith seekers through various media: letter, telephone, and a vibrant online community that provides written and audio content and maintains UU classes and special-interest discussion lists. The CLF's flagship publication, *Quest*, is a regular, periodic worship publication sent to a broad UU audience, and showcases content from Unitarian ministers, thinkers and members from around the world.

PRESENT OPPORTUNITIES

Shifting Sands of Faith—The commitment to identifying exclusively with Christianity is dramatically dropping among Americans, particularly those under 30. Recent studies by the Pew Research Center have shown that “the religious beliefs and practices of Americans do not fit neatly into conventional categories,” and that “large numbers of Americans engage in multiple religious practices, mixing elements of diverse traditions”. Religious affiliation in the U.S. is both diverse and extremely fluid.

We know that Unitarian Universalism uniquely addresses this new paradigm, but is not yet a visible or compelling option for many who might seek us. With deliberate outreach, the CLF can capture the attention of thousands and thousands of ‘unenrolled’ Unitarian Universalists and bring countless spiritually unaffiliated people into conversation and commitment. In a recent CLF member survey, 70% of responders said they support the CLF so that Unitarian Universalism can grow.

Shifting Patterns of Communications—We live in an era in which communication and information technologies make knowledge-sharing and communication among geographically dispersed and diverse peoples easier than ever before. World-wide, over 800 million people use the internet, among them are 300 million English speakers. Our increasing global interconnectedness makes it very difficult to be isolated from human contact. Social media creates countless opportunities for people to re-connect with those they have known throughout their lives and to identify others who share interests, values, and commitments.

And yet, ironically, these very same technologies have contributed to unprecedented levels of social and psychological isolation. Studies show that the average American communicates with fewer people than ever before on deep levels. Using social media to scratch beneath the surface and meet people in their deepest longing is a frontier not yet well-explored.

For the CLF, cultural shifts in religion and communication provide an unparalleled opportunity to:

- Reach free-thinking individuals seeking open spiritual community.
- Serve as an important portal for seekers to access UU content on matters of faith, providing both UUs and the public-at-large access to a comprehensive, one-stop information resource.
- Build membership in bricks and mortar UU congregations.
- Be a beacon of faith, burning brightly and boldly.

UNIQUE ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND EXPERTISE

The CLF's unique character makes it an obvious mechanism to seize the opportunities presented by the changing landscape of religious affiliation in the U.S. The CLF is both an independent organization that supports the mission of the UUA and also an independent UU Congregation with global reach. We are small, nimble and designed to reach the broadest possible community. Our mission and our commitment to best practices in communications and outreach enable us to continually experiment and develop new means of reaching individuals seeking either membership in an open and inclusive spiritual community, or interfaith engagement in a civil and respectful manner.

We are not starting from scratch. We have already created and aggregated spiritual resources for children, families, prisoners, people in the military, young adults, and UUs both geographically remote and actively engaged in local congregations. Our experience developing high quality material designed for the broadest possible outreach is an excellent foundation for even more aggressive and strategic web-based outreach.

Our challenge is not to create more information or materials. Our challenge is to reach people with what we have and they want.

STRATEGY

To capitalize on present needs and opportunities, we envision the following strategy to guide our ministry over the next 3-5 years.

1. **Develop infrastructure for effective collaboration. We need to figure out who is already doing what and how CLF can be value added; how our whole can be greater than the sum of our parts.** Led by the Senior Minister, the CLF will develop its capacity to support effective partnerships with groups such as the UUA, UUMA, DRUUMM, the ICUU, retired UU ministers, affiliates, congregations, Standing on the Side of Love, and interfaith organizations. Special emphasis will involve augmenting the CLF's organizational leadership through ongoing development of CLF advisory and governing boards.
2. **Create a vibrant online sanctuary.** The technology exists to create robust content for seekers and for members, through video, webcast, podcast and to stimulate two-way communication and independent discussion among online visitors and subscribers. The sanctuary will include our own creative reflection and feature our own ministry as individuals with whom seekers can resonate, as well as collecting the best UU thinking and materials which support the message(s) we wish to convey. Building on the CLF's rich trove of religious resources, additional content will be drawn from all over our movement, partnering with UU congregations and organizations and presented in a clear and compelling manner. In particular, we will place emphasis on overcoming typical public misunderstandings and confusion that surround our faith, highlighting the consistent values that serve as the foundation for UU practice.
3. **Find people** seeking faith grounded in free and open inquiry, and helping them find what they're looking for (UUism, in many cases). The CLF will target those most likely to resonate with Unitarian Universalism through a variety of communication vehicles including online, print, face-to-face and other media. It is essential that we make our presence known and available to those who hunger for spiritual community.

Reaching out online in creative, engaging ways is the movement's best hope to find and integrate new Unitarian Universalists. Some portion of them will be excited to participate in a bricks-and-mortar congregation, while some may find online community to be a satisfying alternative. Metrics will determine which methods are effective and enable us to both learn through experimentation and build on success.

Outreach will include strategies designed with targeted audiences and messages. The CLF will also enhance UU visibility by deliberately stepping out into the public square, using the best vehicles possible to reach potential seekers.

OPERATIONAL INVESTMENTS

The CLF will need to enhance its organizational expertise in new media, communications and marketing and expand its pastoral capacity. Initially we anticipate installing a Director of Communications with experience and ability to lead website building, public relations, media relations, new media production, and social media marketing strategies. Eventually, additional associate ministers will be required to refine and expand our programming and to reach out to multicultural constituencies.

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

We believe that the preliminary vision presented here is at once bold and true to the CLF's purpose. It is responsive to the broad and emerging needs in the U.S. and around the world for both open and welcoming faith communities. It also develops pathways for interfaith dialogue.

At this early stage of our planning, we seek your advice and guidance with regard to our vision and strategies. Some questions we hope you will consider:

- 1) Does this concept paper address the potential for the CLF to serve spiritual seekers who—isolated or not—would find our ministry useful? What speaks to you most about it? What are we missing?
- 2) The CLF mission statement, adopted in 1987, reads: *The mission of the CLF is to provide a ministry to isolated religious liberals, and to offer a spiritual home within the Unitarian Universalist movement. CLF promotes the understanding and growth of Unitarian Universalism and institutes programs to that end.* We believe that this mission statement is outdated. What alternative language might be more helpful and compelling? What does this conjure up for you when you look back at the past 23 years?
- 3) Are there outside efforts or initiatives that the CLF needs to be mindful of moving forward?
- 4) Have we fully captured our potential to partner with other UU entities, including the UUA and bricks and mortar congregations, in order to reach seekers?
- 5) What challenges are inherent in our plan and what resources might we need to seek out in order to realize this vision?
- 6) What do you see as the most compelling language to describe what Unitarian Universalism has to offer the world? What myths, poetry, and music express our religious values best?

The CLF will contact you for your responses, and we thank you in advance for your insights.

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