

Southern Region Advisory Council — Summary Learnings Fall 2015 by Kenn Hurto, UUA Congregational Life staff team Lead Executive

Director of Congregational Life, **Scott Tayler**, has established *Advisory Council's* for each of the five UUA Regions. The vision and purpose of these groups is to help him understand what's happening in our congregations and to direct the work of the Region's staff team. A position paper describes **the vision** more fully.

In practice, the **SR Advisory Council** — a volunteer group of 8, with 2 from each District — reaches out to our congregational leaders twice a year: In the Fall, generally, they conduct in depth interviews with small targeted groups; in the Spring, there is be a broader outreach to all the Region's leaders.

To begin this process, however, the SR team experimented with doing both this Fall. Last month, we shared with you the results of the early October **broad survey**. Also, during October and November, the Council conducted 1 to 1½ hour interviews with 12 participants in our *Leadership Experiences*, Clergy and Presidents of 8 “thriving” *mid-size* congregations, and leaders of 5 *missional ministries*.

Subsequent to these conversations, written reports were gathered and then discussed in depth, first with Scott Tayler and SR Lead Executive Kenn Hurto. A second report exchange followed with all the field staff.

As you might imagine, in a short while a great deal of information was obtained. In brief, here are a few of the **take-aways** that will shape the work of the SR Congregational Life team going forward:

1. From the Leadership Experience interviews:

- Deep appreciation for the opportunity to engage Unitarian Universalism at depth, with an on-going desire to go deeper, and to stay connected with other LE graduates.
- A felt need for an LE focused on the unique situations of our smaller congregations. [Note: this already is on the planning calendar.]
- A shared frustration with how to take home what was learned at LE; a desire for continued coaching.
- Concern about accessibility, in terms of time and cost — noting that the “experience” required the full week-long encounter. [Note: an extended week-end LE is in the planning stage.]
- A desire to have conflict case studies include a “what to do” tutorial for application at the home congregation.
- A desire to have the lectures captured on video and posted on the SR website so they may be taken back for viewing with other congregational leaders.

2. From interviews with Mid-Size Congregational Presidents and Ministers:

- A concern the the Regional e-news is too broad, a wondering if it could be recast for a more targeted distribution.
- A concern regarding the field staff's timely responsiveness to calls and e-mails.
- A general lack of understanding what the field staff do — recommendation to create a simple brochure explaining their role.
- A suggestion to have the staff to take greater initiative with their Primary Contacts — a recommendation to schedule routine annual “check-ins” and to craft an annual check-up list. [Note: our UUA currently is in the process of crafting a congregational self-assessment tool to do this.]

- Numerous concerns regarding the attraction of guests and retention of members — recommendation to provide support to congregations around small group ministry programs and a theme-based programming approach.
- General concern that geographic clusters are not working well — leading to a request for more affinity-based targeted groupings such as congregational Presidents, membership coordinators, associate ministers.

3. From the leaders of Missional or Covenantal group interviews:

This was the first instance of a formal outreach to the five groups in our Region:

The Welcome Table, Turley, OK

U-Bar-U Camp & Retreat Center, Mountain Home, TX

The Center for Ethical Living & Social Justice Renewal, New Orleans, LA

The Mountain Conference Center, Highlands, NC

Sacred Fire Unitarian Universalist Mutual Aid, Carrboro, NC

Mission groups, generally, are not congregations per se, so their concerns reflect their kinds of ministry:

- Concern that our *Leadership Experiences* are not relevant to their situations — request the staff craft leadership training that would be more suitable, and suggestion that staff create affinity group links among these ministries.
- Missional work requires a bi-vocational minister, a question of how can field staff support those ministries.
- A need for “back-office” support, particularly during the developmental stage of an emerging group.
- A simple desire to be better known to Unitarian Universalists and for help with funding.

Your congregational life team will digest these learnings and adapt our annual work-plan to improve service to the congregations and missional groups.

I close with deep thanks to the dedicated Advisory Council team:

Florida District

Jennifer Carver, Tallahassee, FL

Scott May, Davie, FL

Mid-South District

Jill Austin, Murfreesboro, TN

The Reverend Deanna Vandiver, New Orleans, LA

Southeast District

Joan Tilghman, Durham, NC

Alan Hollister, Durham, NC

Southwest Conference

The Reverend Mark Walz, Dallas, TX

Marguerite Mills, Nashville, TN