

## State of the Fellowship Executive Team Response

Reverends Wayne Arnason, Kathleen Rolenz and Leah Hart-Landsberg

**Introduction:** During the weekend of February 20-21, The Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship hosted what is commonly known as The State of the Fellowship (SOTF) at which the Transitional Consulting Ministers (Revs. Arnason & Rolenz – Rev A & R) along with Rev. Leah Hart-Landsberg identified some of the cultural norms of the Fellowship, some of its strengths, some of the “curious habits” that Revs. A & R have noticed, and noted areas of challenge, both longer-term and short term. Revs A & R, Rev LHH, and Congregational Life Coordinator Marie Blohowiak read all the “pink” sheets which were the raw documentation of the table conversations. This document is an attempt by the Ministry Team to respond to the information we read in both the summaries, completed by Elliott Garb and what we read. To review the summary sheets, go to the Fellowship website or click [here](#). This summary is not an attempt to address *all* the comments, suggestions and concerns listed; but primarily the ones that may affect the Fellowship for the 2016-2017 Fellowship year.

1. **What Should Endure: Preserving the feel of the small Fellowship was important to people.** They like the informality of the services, the symbols that have endured from when they were a smaller Fellowship. What should endure can be summarized in this one statement “we want to continue to find ways to hear our stories, ways to connect with our own souls so that we can carry the light of compassion and commitment beyond these walls...”

**Ministry Team Response:** We understand that symbols of intimacy, such as the congregational response and coffee in the Sanctuary are important. As Transitional Minister, Rev. Kathleen will respect traditions that are important, while still exploring other ways to achieve the same ends; that of maintaining a sense of informality and connection.

2. **We long for a more robust youth program and want to retain our young adults.** Many comments reflected a sense of great pride of and affection for both religious education and especially for youth of the Fellowship. There was a definite interest in expanding the opportunities for youth to be intentionally connected to and engaged with the Fellowship.

**Ministry Team Response:** The Ministry Team has met individually and/or collectively with adults involved with Fellowship youth, as well as with youth themselves. The Ministry Team and Director of Religious Education, Kim Hartman, are actively engaged in reviewing and revamping both the Coming of Age Program and the Youth Program and will be recruiting new leadership to help spearhead these programs for the upcoming year. We agree that this should be an area of focus.

3. **The 4:30 Saturday Service.** There were a variety of responses to the ministers raising the generally low attendance at the Saturday 4:30 p.m. service, the amount of staff time it takes to put on the service, and the difficulty of programming for children when the average attendance can be quite low. Some felt very strongly that it was a part of the Fellowship’s identity and should remain; others were open to reconsidering the Saturday service.

**Ministry Team Response:** Throughout the month of April, we are distributing surveys to all the Saturday attenders and collecting their responses. We are hosting a conversation on Saturday, May 7th after the service to discuss our findings, to hear from anyone who has not had a chance to offer their opinion, and Rev. Kathleen will make a recommendation to the Board about whether to continue to support the Saturday 4:30 p.m. service at the May Governing Board meeting.

4. **The Staff and the Budget.** While there were few comments directly commenting on the budget, there were many expressions of surprise about the Fellowship being understaffed. If the budget would permit it, we would recommend hiring a programs assistant, which would have dual

responsibilities to support the administrator/ministers and the Director of Religious Education; a bookkeeper, a sexton/facilities manager; a youth coordinator specifically hired to track and tend to youth; and increase hours and budget for a ½ time music director who is expected to be present for, plan and/or perform music for 156 services a year (52 weeks x 3 services) and hire a Social Justice Coordinator to help the Fellowship continue to lead in Social Justice... Given the underwhelming response to the Stewardship Campaign, we cannot imagine this happening. So, something has to give.

**Ministry Team Response:** First, we hope that anyone reading this who has not turned in their pledge will do so as soon as possible. Second, we are required to develop a balanced budget for the Governing Board meeting in May. We continue to be amazed with all that the Fellowship does on a relatively tight budget. At the same time, the expectations understandably, continue to grow. People are proud of their community, appreciate the leadership, both paid and volunteer and enjoy one another.

At the same time, the vitality of programs are dependent upon either committed lay volunteers willing to put in significant time (and many do!) or staff time. There is a limit to how much the church can reasonably expect the staff to do; just as there are limits to what volunteers can do for the Fellowship given their busy, often complicated and multi-demanding lives. It's difficult to "hire" volunteers to do routine tasks that must get done, regardless of when a volunteer is able to do them. Because we are facing a potentially flat or negative increase Stewardship campaign, we don't anticipate being able to add staff at this time. It also does not seem the time to add a lot of new programs or expect that the Fellowship will grow until a new Senior Minister is called. At that time, we anticipate a jump in attendance and in giving, with the anticipation of attracting the best candidate for the Senior Ministry position.

We hope to honor our commitment to increase staff salaries and to pay our fair share to the UUA and to the Region. If salary raises are not in the budget due to a flat or decreased budget, then we will be looking carefully at the programs staff has typically run or supported to determine what seems to be a reasonable expectation for their work and what has been part of "job creep."

The two areas of staff time that seem to experience the most pressure are music and religious education. To that end, if the Saturday service is put on hiatus for a year or more, it would relieve some of the pressure on the Associate Minister, the Music Director, the Director of Religious Education, the Congregational Life Coordinator, plus about a dozen volunteers who must show up to greet, make coffee, serve as pastoral care chaplains, run the sound and powerpoint, provide special music, hymn leader, worship leader, and coordinator of the day.

**5. The Culture of Whiteness and Welcoming All.** One of the mission statements is "welcome all," and there were notable responses to our comments about "white culture" and "welcoming culture." One responded identified it as her "white blindness." By this we believe she meant assuming that the culture of the Fellowship is normative for all, when it is influenced by the majority culture of people who identify as white. The other part of the responses had to do with being a Welcoming Congregation for GBLTQ people. The Fellowship has a proud history of work on Gender & Sexual/Affectional Orientation and Marriage Equality, yet the evidence of that work – (i.e., being a Welcoming Congregation) is not present.

**Ministry Team Response:** We were impressed with the turn out and quality of conversation surrounding the March Wellspring program with Tracey Robertson of Fit-Oshkosh. The Ministry Team intends to follow up with programs this coming year to focus on issues of race, racism, white privilege, and racial justice.

**Conclusion:** We were so grateful for everyone who attended the State of the Fellowship, for the 2021 Team who worked really hard to make it happen and to go so smoothly; for all the caring and thoughtful

responses and for the opportunity to provide feedback for the coming year. We are looking forward to our continued work towards the Fellowship's next chapter. Glad to be on this journey with you. Revs. Kathleen Rolenz, Wayne Arnason & Leah Hart-Landsberg.