



Foothills Unitarian
LOVE UNITES US ALL

CONGREGATIONAL CHANGE

A Decade of Changing Culture, Mission and Engagement
2015-2025

presented by
Rev. Gretchen Haley, Lead Minister

CHANGES

Some of the shifts at Foothills since 2015

Attendance & Engagement

Sundays: from ~200/Sunday in 2016 to ~500/Sunday in 2025
Groups: No groups to >400 people attend a group every month
Every night at church is active and busy.

Missional Change

From Unclear /Generic Mission to specific, orienting and aligning mission in 2016: Unleashing Courageous Love in Northern Colorado

Culture Change

From Scarcity to Abundance (budget from \$500K/year to \$1.4M/year, volunteers from the “same 30 people” to >250 people regularly volunteering); from church feeling optional to critical; relationships from transactional to covenantal

Governance Change

From program-managing Board with informal/non-accountable power to Policy-Based Governance with clear lines of accountability

Systems Change

From unaligned, undeveloped processes (with no use of technology) to aligned, agile innovative systems built for growth and scale



THEORIES OF

Congregational Change

TEACH PEOPLE

to want something they don't
yet know they are longing for

WHEN THEY SAY “COMMUNITY”

They mean: Belonging, Significance, Transcendence
PS Community is not Convenient.

EVERYTHING IS AN EXPERIMENT

Nothing is a permanent change – we are just trying it out, and
can always adjust / go back.

START AS YOU WILL CONTINUE

If the goal is small groups, then every “meeting” is a chance for
small-group like experiences; if the goal is faith formation,
every chalice lighting is a chance to say “this is who we were;
this is who we are; this is who we are becoming.”

EXPERIENCE OTHER SETTINGS

Go on field trips to places that are alive, that are growing –
regardless of theology.

SUCCESS = WANTING MORE

TRUST THE PEOPLE

and they become trustworthy (adrienne maree brown).

PARTNERSHIP IN EVERYTHING

When we hire or recruit people, we are looking for partners in the mission. People who share our dream. Partnership over governance; partnership over job description; partnership in the congregation; partnership with people beyond the congregation. If there aren't partners, it's probably not time to do the thing.

FALLING SHORT IS A GIVEN, PRACTICE REPAIR

What we promise in a covenant is too big to always live up to; if we aren't falling short, our dreams are too small. If falling short is a given, then repair and reconciliation need to be taught and practiced at every level.

YOU + ME + SOMETHING GREATER

A community without something greater is a club. When things get hard, we have to be able to imagine this isn't about us, or for us.

COVENANT

Is the path & destination

THE LONG VIEW

what's the 10 year dream?

LEARN TO LOVE THE MESS

Congregational change is slow, and for a long time a lot of things will not be where you want them to be. Trying to do everything too fast will mean nothing gets done, and you will be burned out.

FEED THE HEALTH

What you pay attention to grows. Mentor, equip and empower healthy partners to lead change with you. Encourage and thank them often. People leaving can be a sign that what you're doing is working.

LOOK BACK TO LOOK AHEAD

For big changes to stick, it helps to be able to say: this isn't new, it's actually old. Study your congregational history to help people remember and return rather than do something entirely new.

FIND THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

Keep people uncomfortable to the degree they can tolerate and grow.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Something impossible one year will be easy another year; don't give up just because something didn't work one time (or even a few times). But also, don't be afraid to let good ideas go.



OTHER KEY TACTICS

For Change

Don't forget snacks. Or childcare.

Seriously, a core practice of church is fellowship.

Food creates ease and fosters connection.

Food communicates care.

Food teaches people abundance (over scarcity).

Making childcare feel easy and abundant was one of our first moves.

It says we are a multi-generational congregation.

It also communicates abundance.

Also free, safe, values-aligned childcare is one of the best gifts you can give parents today.

Don't cut the budget. Go raise more money.

The real game changer was in 2015 when we stopped charging for RE registration, and we had a \$20K deficit in our draft budget. The Board decided rather than go looking where to cut, they'd go raise that money, because they knew the budget represented our mission. AND once you raise it, don't be shy about spending the money you have to GROW THE MISSION. As we grow the mission, the money will keep coming. This can be scary. But that's why we need faith development to be central.

Take attendance.

We take attendance at everything, including Sundays. We started during COVID (for safety reasons) and then the benefits were so great we just didn't stop. This allows us to manage the newcomer pipeline, to provide better pastoral care, to track engagement, to report to the congregation about patterns and demographics. It is a huge support for growth.

Make more space.

Every time we have added more space, our attendance has grown.

You need a great database.

We use Planning Center Online to manage our membership, our pastoral care, our giving, our groups, our check ins, our events, our communications, our calendar, our building use, our worship services and our volunteer management. It took us about 7 years to full implement it (remember: long view), but I don't know what we'd do without it.

Not everyone needs (or wants) to know everything.

Mass communication is reserved for worship series, spiritual practices, and group registration seasons. Otherwise, groups communicate about their stuff to their group; inside institution stuff is also through a group of “most engaged” 300 people who have opted in.

Joy and play the whole way.

We take the work – but not ourselves – seriously. We believe and practice joy as an act of resistance, not as something we need to earn at the end. We practice gratefulness at the end of every service. Life is hard for so many of us these days. Let’s be a source of joy for one another.

OUR CHANGE STRATEGIES



Teach people to want something they don't yet know to ask for



Covenant is the path & destination



Take the Long View – What's the 10 year dream?

Bonus tactics: Snacks, Childcare, Raise more money, Take attendance. Make more space. Get a great database. Not everyone needs to know everything. Joy always.



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THANK YOU!

Email us at hello@foothillsuu.org if you have more questions
or want to talk to any of our staff or lay leaders.

Respect people enough to invite them to change.
– Jean Miller Schmidt, Iliff School of Theology