



## **Gathered Here: An Overview and Summary of Results**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **Catherine's Story**

Despite having been desperately ill for nearly a dozen years, “Catherine” has remained involved in her congregation. Throughout cancer treatments and hospital visits, she sang, directed choirs, and participated in congregational activities. Over the past couple of years, though, she’s struggled with pain, depression, and isolation as her illness has begun to worsen.

Several months ago, her congregation hosted a Gathered Here conversation on a Saturday morning. It was a hard day for her, and she needed to be with people. As she later said, she went to the gathering just to get out of the house.

As the conversation wrapped up several hours later, she enthusiastically shared what a powerful experience it had been. *“I’ve participated in more of these kinds of sessions than I can count, and this was the most meaningful. Starting with interviews and stories grounded in the analytical work, and beginning by looking at what worked helped us think more creatively about the future. I felt deeply engaged throughout the day, and I don’t feel tired at all... even though we’ve been together for hours!”*<sup>1</sup>

Catherine’s participation in Gathered Here nurtured and changed her, even as it changed her relationships and changed the congregation of which she is a part. Its profound value could not be measured. This is the value that Gathered Here has brought over the past year.

This report is a summary of the Gathered Here initiative that was unanimously approved by the Unitarian Universalist Association’s (UUA) Board of Trustees in November of 2010.

Gathered Here has been one of the more ambitious and complex initiatives ever undertaken by the UUA. Its goal has been to engage thousands of Unitarian Universalists (UUs), within and beyond congregations, in conversations about:

- What “gives life” to our faith when we are at our best.
- Our hopes, dreams, and aspirations for Unitarian Universalism’s future.

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the report, direct quotations are italicized.

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the logic behind the following process, please see Diana



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These conversations were and are meaningful to various audiences for different reasons. Our Board of Trustees, whose responsibilities include connecting with key stakeholders, plans to use feedback from the conversations to inform future decisions about its “ends.” Gathered Here has enabled the Board to receive feedback from UUs whose voices are not often heard: youth and young adults, people of color, and members of other historically marginalized groups within our faith.

UUA staff members, who are responsible for implementation of programs and services, particularly hope this feedback will inform ongoing stewardship and development work (especially the Capital Campaign) and support the burgeoning Congregations and Beyond initiative. They also plan to look to this feedback as they consider future themes and programming for General Assembly (GA).

Perhaps most important, the grassroots conversations that took place UUs were gathered together forged or strengthened relationships among those who participated. In some cases, participants were total strangers who formed bonds that may continue for many years to come. They shared meaningful stories. They unleashed ideas. And they cultivated optimism and hope. All of these outcomes—some of which were reported, and some of which took place under the radar—are essential to the health of our communities.

This report is divided into three sections:

- **Section One** offers background information and details about the initiative. It will be most useful to those who wish to understand the historical basis for the methods used and decisions made along the way. Feel free to skip this section if you wish instead to focus on the results and what we learned.
- **Section Two** outlines the insights and recommendations made by the team that read the submitted conversation summaries. This section focuses on what the summaries told us about our “Positive Core” (i.e., who we are when we’re at our best) and about participants’ hopes for the future of our faith. It highlights some of the most powerful and most provocative quotations, stories, and visions of the future. **We highly recommend you read and reflect on this section.**
- **Section Three** is a series of Appendices that provide detailed information about various aspects of the initiative. The appendices are referred to throughout the report, but are completely optional reading prior to the Board meeting.



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### **SECTION ONE: BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW**

#### **Emerging Purpose**

The proposal that the Board endorsed during their November 2010 meeting outlined a process whose purpose was to:

- Inform and deepen our collective understanding of congregational values and aspirations.
- Develop a compelling shared vision for the UUA's future (also known as our Association's "Ends"), which will shape and direct strategic and operational decisions (also known as our "Means") going forward.

The first step in that process was to identify a 12- to 16-person Planning Team, representing a microcosm of the 200-person staff, 24-person Board, UUMA, and District Presidents' Association, with emphasis on including historically marginalized persons. This Planning Team's role was to affirm or rearticulate the project purpose, to finalize the project design and implementation strategy, and to launch and support the initiative.

In its February meeting, the Planning Team (whose members are listed in Appendix A) wrestled with the challenge of engaging current and future generations of UUs, as well as those whose voices are not often heard. In keeping with these goals, they reached the following key decisions:

#### **Purpose**

The overall purpose of the initiative is to **"discover our shared aspirations and unleash the power of our faith"** through structured one on one and group conversations.

#### **Participation**

The invitation is to **all Unitarian Universalists** who are committed to the future of the faith, even those not actively or directly affiliated with congregations or fellowships.

#### **Process**

The process will be designed in such a manner as to **strengthen relationships at the most local level possible** (i.e., within and across UU communities) and to **provide opportunities for unaffiliated UUs to actively participate.**



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### **Emerging Design**

Our design initially included:

- *One on One Conversations* to engage key leaders in the process and to build curiosity and momentum. Over time, these conversations enabled individual UUs to participate, even if their “home” congregation or community did not. (The One on One Interview Guide, designed by the Planning Team during its February meeting, is available on the Gathered Here webpage along with other related documents.)
- *Facilitator Training*, to prepare those who would assist in implementation of Community Conversations.
- *Community Conversations*, to invite groups of UUs to conduct two-way interviews, share positive experiences about their lives as UUs, and reflect on how these positive experiences can enhance our congregations, communities, and faith as a whole.
- *Local and regional integration of findings*, to increase communication, collaboration, and a shared sense of purpose and intention for this project.

As the initiative progressed, however, we chose to simplify materials and eliminate the extra steps of cluster- and regional-level integration. Many congregations and communities were intrigued by the prospect of participation, but very few were taking the plunge.

In December of last year, we developed a handful of downloadable materials and encouraged all those who were interested to take what they needed, rather than signing up, training a facilitator, and jumping through the many hoops that were embedded in our original design. Later in the process, we adapted the design so it could be used with virtual groups; this opened doors for increased participation from both DRUUMM and EQUUAL Access.

As it turned out, the decision to simplify in this way had mixed results. Participation quickly increased, as we had hoped it would. But feedback from that participation was spotty. We had no way of knowing who had downloaded the materials and so were unable to track down missing summary sheets. An anecdotal example of this comes from our Consultant. In reviewing summary sheets along the way, she quickly recognized that nearly one-third of the individuals and congregations she had personally prepared for the Gathered Here process had not submitted feedback.

What does this mean for our process? Ultimately it means that we will never fully know the impact Gathered Here has had on our movement. Participants formed relationships, launched projects, and unleashed new ideas, but we may never understand the extent to which this program has affected our communities.



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What we do know is that we received feedback from nearly 1,200 individual participants, over 100 of whom participated in One on One Conversations. The balance of the participants took part in small or large Community Conversations—in congregations, fellowships, or UU communities; at district meetings, camps, conferences, and meetings. (See Appendix B for a demographic analysis of reported participants.)

This report is a summary of the feedback that was submitted and reflections on its meaning.

### **The Meaning Making Process**

In mid-September 2012, a 6-person Meaning Making Team convened for two days in Boston, to conduct a qualitative, narrative analysis of all One on One and Community Conversations, examining what people said about Unitarian Universalism and their hopes and dreams for the future of our faith. These team members were invited to participate because their positions would allow them to benefit greatly from having a strong connection to the stories.

Before the meeting began, each person read one-third of the 160 summary sheets, representing all 1,127 reported participants. As they did so, they used a Meaning Making Worksheet to identify both the most meaningful stories and the most powerful visions of the future that they read.

Following is a step-by-step summary of the process they used to make meaning of the summaries they read:<sup>2</sup>

1. Two 3-person teams (each including both Board and Staff members) shared the stories they had highlighted and identified the core themes embedded in the stories. (These are the conditions that, if replicated in the future, would likely produce a similarly positive result.)
2. The whole group compared stories and themes, and began to articulate the Positive Core of Unitarian Universalism.
3. Small teams reexamined and validated this Positive Core through the lens of feedback from respondents who are currently marginalized in Unitarian Universalism, including:
  - Youth and young adults

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the logic behind the following process, please see Diana Whitney and Amanda Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2003), 161-164.



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- People of color
  - People with disabilities
  - Those who are less economically advantaged
  - Non-traditional or virtual communities
4. First individuals, then small groups, then the group as a whole wrote a Vision Statement in response to the following questions:

*What is your highest and best image for the future of our faith?*

*What bold, provocative dreams have you collectively forged after your extensive reflections?*

*What dreams do you have that, if realized, would enable Unitarian Universalism to amplify its most positive qualities while stretching to achieve its highest, most positive potential?*

5. Having finalized both a description of the Positive Core and a collective Vision Statement, team members revisited the summary sheets to identify the stories, quotations and visions of the future that best summarized the essence of what they'd learned. These stories and visions are presented along with the findings in section two of this report.
6. The team's next task was to identify stakeholder groups that needed to hear about the outcomes and findings of Gathered Here. Each member of the team individually brainstormed a list of stakeholders, along with what they needed to hear. After the meeting was over, the Consultant supplemented the team's recommendations with her own. (These recommendations, along with the Board's draft Ends, will be presented to members of the UUA staff later this fall.)
7. At the conclusion of the session, group members divided into new sub-teams in support of the actual writing of the report. Two members worked on refining the Positive Core description. Another two did the same for the Vision Statement. Everyone stayed connected to answer questions and collaborate when needed as the report was being drafted.



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### **SECTION TWO: REFLECTIONS ON THE SUMMARY SHEETS**

#### **Unitarian Universalism's Positive Core**

The Positive Core describes conditions or qualities that give life to our faith. Its elements have been gleaned from episodes in our history when we were at our very best. If we consciously replicate these elements, we will enhance our vitality and open the door for similarly life-giving results in the future.<sup>3</sup>

To be clear, it is not necessary for all of the elements of this Positive Core to be present in order for an experience to be transformational. But in general, the more elements that are present at a given time, the more vitality we are likely to unleash.

The following is a synopsis of the Positive Core articulated through narrative analysis of the stories recorded on the Gathered Here summary sheets.

We are at our best when we...

- Grow into our best selves and honor the divine in each person.
- Practice spiritual justice: justice-making grounded in faith and worship.
- Embrace fellow travelers within and beyond our faith, building community together.
- Proactively invite people to share themselves and their gifts.
- Have such a strong sense of our religious purpose and identity that we must act on it.
- Covenant together to create sustained relationships across all ages and cultures.
- Transcend geographic, national, and language barriers.
- Experience spiritual depth, individually and collectively.

All but one of these elements were equally reflected in stories from “minority” populations, as well as from the general group of participants. The last element was most clearly articulated in stories told by youth and young adults.

What follows are deeper reflections on each of the elements, together with illustrative stories and quotations.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information about this concept, please see Whitney and Trosten-Bloom, *The Power of Appreciative Inquiry*, 164.



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### **We Are At Our Best When We... Grow into Our Best Selves and Honor the Divine in Each Person**

#### **Worship in the Prison**

*Our congregation was contacted by a prisoner up in Florence, AZ: a UU, wanting to start a UU community in the prison. Groups of eight of us went through training with the prison chaplain. When the training was over, these groups began worshipping with the prisoners—eight people at a time. It's helped us to live our principles, and forced us to see the prisoners more fully than we would otherwise... The experience has changed us all.*

Sybelle Van Ervan  
UU Church of Tucson

Taking the time to respect, connect with, and value other people is one of the spiritual practices that we UUs affirm. When we see another person as “real,” we help them connect with their inherent worth and dignity and ensure that this connection is reflected back to them. We also open ourselves to be changed.

We have far more opportunities than we might imagine to practice this principle within our UU communities, as our philosophical and spiritual diversity forces us to recognize and celebrate people as fellow travelers regardless of whether they share our beliefs. As a participant in the Community Conversation at the Northern New England District's annual meeting said: “*Being UU challenges me to be quick to understand but slow to judge.*” Similarly powerful observations came from participants in the UU Church of Fresno's Conversation: “*I can change my mind by what I learn here,*” and “*My faith requires me to learn and grow.*”

When we are at our best, however, we allow ourselves to truly listen to and value others—and to be touched, transformed, or changed in the process. One participant described the challenge as “*overcoming our fear of being changed.*” This transformation is part of how this practice becomes more than an ethical principle. Bringing out the best in others so that we ourselves can become better is one of the ways we become increasingly relevant in today's deeply divided world.

### **We Are At Our Best When We... Practice Spiritual Justice Grounded in Faith and Worship**

#### **The Women's March**





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*In 2004, I attended a Women's March on Washington. The march was preceded by a worship service at All Souls Church. We were packed together in the sanctuary for worship, and there was great energy in the room. The service was vital and interactive; the sermon integrated with and connected me to other parts of my life... to both festivity and struggle. I left to join the march. There was a racially diverse mix of people, music, and backgrounds, and an eclectic mix of cultural styles. I was surrounded both by people I loved, and people I didn't know.*

*I had to go through a lot get there, but it was more than worth the effort. A march can be a high, but the context is what makes it spiritually meaningful.*

The Reverend Dr. Rebecca Parker  
President, Starr King School for the Ministry

The concept of spiritual justice flows from conversations within the Meaning Making Team. Though the term itself was never cited in the summary sheets, once named it immediately captured the essence of one of the most powerful elements of our positive core.

As a general rule, UUs are strongly committed to social justice and social action work, but we are at our best when, emboldened by faith, we do the religious work of building the world that we dream of. Through worship, meditation, prayer, and other spiritual practices, we prepare ourselves to engage in social justice and social outreach in a faithful manner, practicing habits of gentleness, compassion, humility, and expansiveness.

When faithfully practiced, spiritual justice opens the hearts of those who might otherwise oppose us, as the following story demonstrates.

### **The Phoenix Policeman**

*I participated in the 2010 civil disobedience activity in Phoenix. My job was to ensure that my partner, who was being arrested, was safe. So I was positioned on the front row of the sidewalk, directly opposite a young policeman.*

*As I stood there watching, a woman behind me became very agitated and started to yell at the police officer. I tried to calm her, but my efforts only seemed to upset her more. "Who are you to tell me to calm down?!" she vehemently responded.*



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*The situation was clearly escalating, so I began to sing. “When I breathe in, I breathe in peace. When I breathe out I breathe out love...”<sup>4</sup> Several of those who had been arrested, along with other UU protesters, took up the song and it began to diffuse the tension. When I noticed that the woman behind me had left, I looked into the eyes of the policeman and asked if he was OK.*

*With tears running down his face, he said “Yes, and thank you.”*

The Reverend Elaine Peresluha  
Interim Minister, First Parish of Concord

When we practice spiritual justice, we provide safety and respect to others. At the same time, we make ourselves more open, more vulnerable, and more receptive. A participant in last summer’s Tent City Vigil observed, *“I felt alive, open, and connected to fellow travelers on the buses, at the gathering, and in the Tent City facility itself. Everything about the gathering was meaningful, from the opening worship service, to the covenant of nonviolence, to the prayer and song on the bus, to the candles and song at the vigil.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the **entire evening** was a powerful experience of worship and connection—which hopefully also will make a difference to those who are suffering.”* The Reverend Dr. Rebecca Parker comments, *“I chose Unitarian Universalism so I could be part of a community that could hold the soul.”*

On the heels of the Tent City vigil, the Reverend Nate Walker shared a dream for the future of our faith: that when we arrive to help, people will take a deep breath and say, *“Ahhhh... yessss. The UUs are here,”* acknowledging that our very presence is settling, calming, and affirming for those committed to building a world that works for all.

When we are at our best, we UUs practice spiritual justice: justice-making grounded in faith and worship. It’s how we make the biggest difference in the world. It’s how we allow the work to change us, as well as our communities.

### **We Are At Our Best When We... Embrace Fellow Travelers Within and Beyond Our Faith, Building Community Together**

#### **A Powerful Partnership**

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, Sara Dan, “Meditation on Breathing,” *Singing the Journey* (Boston, MA: The Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005), #1009.

<sup>5</sup> “Meditation on Breathing,” cited above, was also sung at the Tent City Vigil.



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*I'm a minister of a 30-person joint UU/UCC church in inner city Chicago. The church is very diverse, and very different from the UU "norm." Our members are African American, Latino, and white, and largely poor.*

*The history of this unlikely partnership goes back a few years. Both the congregation and the building were dying; but there was a homeless shelter in the basement, and nobody wanted the shelter to die. So folks from two local communities, both of which were committed to preserving the shelter, decided to do what it took to stay alive.*

*It's been a challenge for all of us—myself included. I've done the work, though, because my UU values call me to reach out to and really understand the spiritual beliefs and practices of my UCC congregants, many of whom are very Christian.*

*So as for the shelter: it remains open, as everyone had hoped would be the case. Now we are opening upper floors of the church for different kinds of gatherings, for a local theatre, and for other service work. It was all made possible when we stretched our definition of who "we" were. Our faith is bigger than any one dogma."*

Reverend Jean Darling  
Senior Minister, People's Church of Chicago

Commitment to both invitation and spiritual partnership logically flow from our principles. They are important to our sense of identity and to how we engage with the world. But this commitment often refers to ways in which we invite people to join "us," rather than expanding our definition of membership to include a community of all like-spirited, like-hearted, and like-minded travelers.

This year's Justice GA was a powerful example of the strength of partnership beyond our walls. We actively embraced non-UU partners in order to increase the strength and impact of our work for immigrant justice. UU congregations and communities have similarly embraced fellow travelers as they work in support of civil rights, marriage equality, and other social justice activities.

This element of our positive core powerfully points to a possible future for our faith. Living this commitment even more fully might help us find ways to expand our influence, regardless of the size of our "membership." It might even encourage like-spirited people who live beyond congregations to find and join us in our quest.



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### **We Are At Our Best When We... Proactively Invite People to Share Themselves and Their Gifts**

#### **Raziq's Story**

*I had been gone from Unitarian Universalism for a while. But a few people kept up with me because of my blog, and my work with video and social media. Then in 2010, Kimberley [sic] and Eric David Carlson asked me to come to the Continental Young Adult Conference for OPUS, and work as a videographer.*

*I was there, enjoying the dancing, worship, and meaningful community building. Then members of the "appointing committee" encouraged me to throw my name in the hat for the position of YA Observer. The invitation surprised me, and I asked them why. They listed several qualities in me that they admired: my communication ability, my work ethic, and my diverse voice and perspective. So I asked to be considered for the job, and I was chosen.*

*This was literally the only time anyone outside of the Anti-Racist Anti-Oppression community had ever approached me to lead something in the faith. I was deeply touched that people were interested in my skills and personality, as opposed to the color of my skin. I also appreciated that the group noticed its homogeneity and **wanted** to diversify; but in doing so, they didn't try to "utilize" the first person of color that came along. Finally, I was reassured that I was seen as diverse, unique, and important for **all** my personal attributes—where I came from and my gender, as well as my ethnicity. It made me feel part of a real conversation, and a real movement towards wholeness.*

*As a result of all this, I started attending church again. The experience had reignited my love of the faith.*

Raziq Brown  
First Jefferson Unitarian Universalist Church, Fort Worth, TX

Several of the stories shared in One on One and Community Conversations spoke of the power of sincere invitation, an invitation that comes from having really seen and appreciated someone and from recognizing their unique gifts and humanity. As Raziq's story illustrates, this is a particularly poignant quality as we reach out to include the people whose voices are not often heard: youth and young adults, people of color, people with disabilities, and other historically marginalized groups. Our commitment to diversity and social justice for their own sake can on occasion cause us to see people as representatives of historically marginalized groups, rather than seeing them as unique, whole people



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whose value and contribution extends well beyond their capacity to stand in for a larger, underrepresented population. “*We should reach out to others as equals,*” said a member of the UU Congregation of Princeton, “*not on the basis of ‘how can I help you,’ but as partners working together to make each other’s lives better.*” One on One Conversation participant Greg Boyd similarly observed that “*people must know and ‘feel’ their stories are valuable; that what they say matters and will make a difference.*”

When we are at our best, UUs recognize each person’s unique gifts, talents, hopes, and dreams and find ways to engage those gifts to support one another, strengthen our movement, and give form to our vision of beloved community.

### **We Are At Our Best When We... Have Such a Strong Sense of Religious Purpose and Identity That We Must Act On It**

#### **Cross-Country Compassion**

*It was December of 1998, a few days before Christmas, when my wife, daughter, and I were serving dinner at a Denver-area rescue mission. A young man came to sit next to us. He looked as if he had been beaten, and we were worried. My wife (who speaks Spanish) asked him what had happened and if he was all right.*

*His name was Noa. It seems that “coyotes” had driven him and others across the US border. Just after they crossed into Colorado, their van flipped over, killing several of the passengers—including his younger brother. He awoke in a Denver hospital, remembering nothing of what had happened; but he soon learned the details of the accident from reading a newspaper article.*

*We took him home with us. By process of elimination and a lot of luck, we found the small village where his family lived, and called there to speak with his sister. I contacted the coroner in the small town where the bodies of three of the victims were held, and then drove him to the morgue (which was four hours away), so he could identify his brother’s body. Thankfully, a fund collected by a local politician enabled us to have the body shipped back to Mexico for burial; so I also arranged that. It was wrenching. He was 20, and his brother was 18. They were both so young.*

*Florida was where the coyotes had promised to take him, so when all this was done, my wife and I contacted his sister who lived there. (We’d gotten her*



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*number from the call to Mexico.) She begged us not to put her brother on a plane. She was worried that his illegal status, combined with his inability to speak English, would result in his being arrested and deported. So I rented a car and drove him to Florida.*

*Later, a reporter asked me why I'd done all this, remarking that it was "such a Christian thing to do." I replied that it was a Unitarian Universalist thing to do. I did it because I could. I did it because I had to.*

Carmen Corica

"A roaming UU without a congregation"

Unitarians and Universalists alike have always lived from a place of passionate commitment to religious purpose. RE programs, sermons, and conversations regularly lift up stories of faithful UUs who have acted with conscience to make right what is wrong, often paying great personal cost to do so.

Conversation participants cited Olympia Brown and James Reeb, UUSC founders Martha and Waitstill Sharp, and others as exemplars of faithful people who "*held tight to their religious purpose, persevering against the odds*" to make real what our early forebears might have described as a kingdom of heaven on earth. But equally moving and perhaps even more powerful are stories like Carmen's—of ordinary UUs whose faith compels them to do all that they can. As members of the Pacific Northwest Board shared during their Community Conversation, "*Unitarian Universalism at its best is the experience of human yearning, met. Our work for social justice is the essential embodiment of our faith.*"

When UUs are at their best, we eagerly seek out one another's stories, and affirm one another's religious commitment to do all that we can. The more we do this, the more likely it will be that "*stories like these will no longer be exceptional, but will be the rule.*"

### **We Are At Our Best When We... Covenant Together to Create Sustained Relationships across All Ages and Cultures**

#### **The Covenant**

*In my district in the fall con of '08, there was a lot of struggling over rules. The youth took over the main room and created a big covenant, from the ground up. It took all night to do it.*

*That covenant has served as a foundation for building the youth community in our district since then. It turned the community around, and in fact the*



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*conferences are growing really quickly and the sponsors are enjoying it more. This 'con-temple' has now been used all over the country.*

*We created a beautiful document and a sense of community, the likes of which I've never seen paralleled on that scale. It gave us all a profound sense of ownership and belonging."*

Caleb Raible-Clark  
Board Youth Trustee At-Large

Commitment to right relationship is one of the most important ties that bind UUs to one another. We covenant to live respectfully and well, and in so doing, to learn how to live well with those outside of our community. Living in covenant is indeed a primary spiritual practice of Unitarian Universalism.

A participant in a Community Conversation for Young Adults of Color talked about the need to "*embrace the salad bowl.*" This is only possible when the container of covenant keeps us safe and connected to one another.

In times of challenge, commitment through covenant becomes particularly meaningful. The UU congregations of greater New Orleans provide a striking example. On the heels of Katrina, ministers and lay leaders from many congregations worked together to rebuild. As Reverend Erik David Carlson shared in his One on One Conversation, "*They didn't always agree; but they stayed together and kept talking. The solutions that they forged through their disagreements and their need were far better than could have been crafted by any one person or congregation.*"

Reverend Scott McNeil described yet another story of how covenant brought people back into relationship after a deeply hurtful episode. Youth of color, who had experienced conflict and a lack of welcome during the 2005 GA in Ft. Worth, TX, chose to "*come back to the table, understanding that Beloved Community is not a place where there is no conflict, but a place where conflict is met with love. They came back to ensure it did not happen again to others, feeling a responsibility to make it better for the next folks. Also, they felt a commitment and responsibility to the faith community itself.*" This and others stories like it illustrate how commitment to covenant gives UUs courage to compassionately confront everything from misunderstandings to outright prejudice.

When we are at our best, we share awareness of and commitment to our covenants within and beyond our communities.



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### **We Are At Our Best When We... Transcend Geographic, National, and Language Barriers**

#### **The Picnic**

*About four years ago, I traveled with a group of adults and teens to visit our Unitarian Partner Church in Transylvania. While there, our youngest traveler—a 14-year-old girl—formed a fast friendship with a Roma (Gypsy) girl of about the same age.*

*One afternoon we planned a traditional Transylvanian gathering, with local food and pastries over an open fire. We were to gather in the farmyard of a lay leader from the local Unitarian Church.*

*Arriving at the gathering I heard things already underway; but saw two people sitting on a picnic table outside the farmyard gate. It was our youngest American UU and her Roma girlfriend, huddled together. I asked them to follow along with me; but the American girl said she was not going because her friend was not welcomed.*

*Our minister stopped and joined us as we talked. The girl from our church was near tears, but defiant. She refused to let her friend be excluded. And she was, through her actions, demanding that we adults stand with her. Had we not taught her about friendship and equality and standing for your principles? She was doing that now. I was so proud of her, and wanted to rise to her challenge; but we were there for just a short time, and the minister and I feared that the Roma girl might suffer as a result of our actions.*

*Not having the language to communicate all this with the Roma, we asked if she wanted to come to the party—and she did. So I sat with the girls while our minister went to speak with the Transylvanian minister who, in turn, spoke with the host. The Roma girl was welcomed as a guest of our visiting group, and we all spent an afternoon having fun together.*

*Here I was, the only African American on the trip seeing how everywhere, someone is made to be the “outsider.” At the same time, I saw that one young UU girl, who had learned another way, was willing to act on what she’d learned to stand up for something different. I still sometimes wonder if this episode caused trouble for the Roma girl after we left; but then remind myself that the willingness of the American UU’s to befriend everyone in the village was an*





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*important and needed example. I grew to see the relationship with our Partner Church as a real partnership—with learning, growing, and challenges on both sides. We all had something to learn.*

Reverend Natalie Maxwell Fenimore  
President of LREDA and Minister, Davies Memorial UU Church

Throughout our history, UUs have been committed to justice, equality, and the democratic process and have fought for the rights of people from all races, genders, sexual orientations, backgrounds, and creeds. Indeed, Carmen's story of "Cross-Country Compassion" illustrates how UUs at their best are ready and willing to reach across cultural and language divides to form relationships and make the world a fairer, more just place.

Keith Arnold and David Burrows enacted this element of our positive core when they spent their sabbatical teaching in a school for indigenous girls sponsored by the Holdeen India Project. Congregations in Southern Arizona have worked to protect immigrants at border crossings, in partnership with No Mas Muertes ("No More Deaths") and other organizations. Just this past year, a group of 10 seminarians traveled to Haiti to engage in service and theological reflection.

These are just a few of the ways in which individual UUs, UU congregations, and other UU communities transcend geographic, national, and language barriers to live our principles and share our faith. When we are at our best, we reach out to others with open hearts.

### **We Are At Our Best When We... Experience Spiritual Depth, Individually and Collectively**

#### **Cracked Open With the Spirit**

*In July 2011, I attended the Southwestern UU Summer Institute. Right about the time when I was worn out with white men worship services, a gay, black minister saved me with an impassioned testimony for the power of Universalism.*

*The redemption continued into the next morning, when Jennifer Nichols—the SWUUC District Director for Lifespan Faith Development—joined with Young Adult participants to lead a morning worship service. They read the familiar story of 'The Rabbi's Gift' aloud, and it just about cracked me open with the spirit. That—followed by a story of monks who were tricked into respecting one another's greatest potential—reminded me how little changes in behavior really will change the world.*



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*I was so moved that I had to leave the room.*

Carrie Stewart  
Pathways Church, Southlake, TX

As the beginning of this section mentioned, this final element of the Positive Core first came to light as our team worked to affirm or revise their findings by looking through the lens of “minority” participants. Each of the small groups reviewed summary sheets from several of these groups, youth and young adults being among them. Though the story articulated above came from an adult participant, deep community building and spiritual depth show up as crucial to the religious experience in nearly all of the Community Conversations involving youth and young adults. This reflects positively on the nature of youth and young adult programming, which is explicitly designed to promote character formation, spiritual formation, and intimate community.

Many (if not all) religious education programs, youth cons, youth groups, and camps offer teens extended, repeating time with one another. Both the time and the structure encourage them to forge intimate, respectful, unconditionally loving relationships while engaging in alternative worship, spiritual discovery, and powerful rituals.

Most of these gatherings involve small groups; at their best, these groups are structured and facilitated to encourage both safety and depth. They enable participants to feel seen, heard, and appreciated for who they are. Participant Greg Boyd described this as *“learning to talk in ways others can hear, and helping others on their own terms.”* Programs like the Coming of Age curriculum include an abbreviated “Vision Quest,” and rites of passage are marked ceremonially. These activities help UU youth and young adults develop a sense of spiritual identity and connection with the faith. As Connie Arend of the Southeast District shared with her mother during their drive to this year’s GA, *“Thank you for raising me a UU. It’s taught me who I am, how to have fun, and how to meet a lot of good people.”*

When we are at our best, this element of our Positive Core is present for UUs of all ages, but in general it is more explicitly present for youth and young adults. Might we revitalize our faith as a whole by consciously incorporating this element into **all** of our communities and gatherings? Janine Larsen speculated on such a possibility as she imagined a future in which GA and district assemblies would involve *“local, smaller circles, meeting within larger circles, sharing acts of service and acts of reflection”*—a strikingly similar model to that which was implemented at GA this year. Perhaps this will become a template for future gatherings.



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### **Possibilities for the Future**

*“We need to be called back to the goodness in ourselves and others, so we can find the truth that can uncover and build paradise on earth. We need to focus on the ‘we’ that reaches out rather than the ‘I’ that pulls us in.”*

*“Imagine a GA-like gathering being hosted in many locations, with live broadcast streaming... Throughout the gatherings, in person and virtually, there are groups that are multi-generational, multi-racial, multi-cultural. They’re celebrating and breathing a collective sigh of recognition and awe that they are a living, breathing Beloved Community.”*

*“Tell the old story, and paint the new story—be BOTH a religious tradition dating back through centuries and also a spiritual community ever-evolving and changing.”*

*“Let’s hold a Hip Hop GA in Detroit! Let’s rap and dance Salsa. Let’s be spicy and raucous and give everyone a chance to share in cultural experience... Call the Young Adult Network Steering Committee... we’ll help!”*

During every Conversation (Community and One on One) people were given opportunities to imagine the future of our faith. In Community Conversations, these opportunities were prioritized; they were not in One on One Conversations.

We opened this section with quotations from the Summary Sheets. What follows is a description of the patterns we observed in these same Summary Sheets, along with a handful of additional images to stimulate our collective imagination. We conclude with a single vision statement, crafted by the Meaning Making Team and supported by others outside the team. This vision statement captures the essence of what the Meaning Making Team learned from being deeply immersed in many other people’s stories and aspirations.

The quotations that open each part of this section are a small handful of some of the most compelling stories that were shared in the summaries. Read them as you would a meditation book: one at a time, contemplatively. Perhaps read a few each day between now and the Board meeting. Allow them to inspire and excite you! When you are ready, continue through the pages below, where we outline repeating patterns such as more social justice work; growth and increased visibility for the faith; enhanced opportunities for spiritual growth and development; partnership within and outside our faith; multiculturalism, political awareness, and intergenerational support; and new models of stewardship.



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### **We Are Seeking More Spiritual Justice Work**

We should *“Spread our faith through evangelical endeavors; encourage everyone to be willing to be changed by their experiences.”*

Not surprisingly, spiritual and social justice dreams were the most frequently repeated themes in these summaries. Several of the statements built on the idea of social justice work grounded in faith and worship. *“If we connect spirituality and ritual with activism and doing, both will be more effective,”* said one participant; another attested that *“strong worship strengthens the community for its mission.”*

There were a number of aspirational statements that were quite generic (*“do more social justice work”*), while others were rather specific. Here are some of the exciting possibilities that were included in this category:

- Become national facilitators of positive dialogue.
- Create discrete UU faith-based organizations, formed by laity with a coherent articulation of the theological basis.
- Support young adult service houses.
- Encourage more UU ministers to serve in hospitals, prisons, military, and community programs.
- Balance spirituality and intellect.
- Credential social justice leaders.

### **We Are Seeking Growth and Increased Visibility for the Faith**

This is another aspiration most UUs share. Many people and groups expressed a desire for the faith to grow and to be better known in the world. *“I want to see a physical, recognized, supported, and visible liberal religious congregation within average commuting distance of every single person in this country,”* said one participant. Others recommended increased advertising and use of media (particularly social media), positive and rational messaging and education about who we are, bold public witness, and becoming a national voice of conscience.

One way for us to increase our visibility is to become even more of a prophetic voice and advocate for multiculturalism, justice, and freedom (religious and political, as well as freedom of expression). This subset of the “growth” category was often cited in Community and One on One Conversation summaries.

Several people cited the Standing on the Side of Love campaign as a good model for building public awareness of our values while stopping short of evangelizing. One person



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suggested that we return to our message of universal salvation as a way of harnessing a powerful message that will speak to a broader community than we have reached in the past.

A couple of stand-alone aspirations caught our attention for their originality:

- Form a UU school.
- *“Go ultra local! Have third-space meeting places and community centers.”*
- Create experimental UU communities (coops, communes, missions, and organizations) that will attract a younger generation.

Several people directly or indirectly referenced the challenge of building a faith that appeals to people of radically different generations. Two of these stand out, as they clearly state some of the philosophical and lifestyle challenges that face us:

- *“Share our message so that it can be heard and reaches newcomers ‘where they live,’ then transform those who are already in the faith so that we don’t scare the new converts away!”*
- *“Do more with virtual community. But wait! Perhaps a focus on virtual community is leaving ‘old, non-technical’ people behind.”*

### **We Are Seeking Enhanced Opportunities for Spiritual Growth and Development**

*“This community is about spiritual development, and we can’t be afraid to claim that purpose and identity. Intellect and justice work are important, but if there isn’t a community that appeals to our emotions, we won’t be drawn to return again and again.”*

*“In my ideal future, we are worshipping together and we are singing together. We are using a common theological language that speaks to the depth of our souls. We’re not afraid to claim who we are religiously, even if that leaves some people out.”*

*“I envision us celebrating. Recognizing how alike we are, despite our differences. There are people standing, and others sitting in wheelchairs. Some are in culturally appropriate attire: saris, turbans, and more. There are more languages than I can count, and many of them I don’t understand. White, able-bodied Americans are not dominating; they’re simply part of a larger community.”*

Some of the stated hopes and aspirations appear to build upon yet another element of our positive core: “We are at our best when we experience spiritual depth, individually and



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collectively.” It seems that a great number of Gathered Here participants of all ages place a high value on their capacities to grow spiritually and to experience powerful, heart-filled, celebratory worship.

Specific ideas included: rituals for all life passages; diversity of worship styles; a culturally relevant pedagogy; an OWL family camp; further incorporation of international traditions; and a more theistic approach in our gatherings—more “*religiosity*.”

Several participants cited a desire to incorporate body-centered traditions, engaging people through music, singing, dancing, theatre, and visual arts.

One person talked about “*transformative worship, woven through our days*,” while another envisioned a UU “*revival*.” (The latter person followed up that statement by recoiling at the prospect of being “*born-again*,” she then recanted, saying in her imaginary future this would no longer be so scary for her.)

A few people referenced the concept of collective worship, involving multiple locations and communities:

- “*Congregations worshiping together, unconstrained by physical space.*”
- “*Different elements of the worship could be offered from different locations.*”
- “*Opportunities for holy time and sacred time that could move out beyond congregations, perhaps through the denomination, connecting local area congregations or regions together—if not in person, then by (multi)media and other forms of shared awareness.*”

### **We Are Seeking Partnership Within and Outside of the Faith**

This aspiration, like several earlier ones, is an echo of the Positive Core element: “We are at our best when we embrace fellow travelers within and beyond our faith, building community together.” These ideas speak powerfully to the possibilities that await us if only we will reach beyond the walls of our individual congregations and fellowships. In addition to the generic suggestions (“*reach out to new groups and ideologies*,” “*find shared interests with other faith traditions*”), we were introduced to a myriad of possibilities for partnership, such as:

- Form centers for eco-justice.
- Sponsor a summit or peace conference and invite all faith traditions.
- Create a national forum on religious tolerance/civil discourse.
- Work with other faiths and organizations in areas such as immigration reform, marriage equality, climate change, the death penalty, childhood mortality, and more.



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- Sponsor home gatherings of people with different views.

Several people spoke directly to the importance of building interfaith appreciation and understanding through such things as a nationally developed interfaith curriculum or joyous interfaith worship. For this to be effective, however, we must have *“a sense of humility that we can learn from others,”* and *“we have to be willing to work across divides.”*

### **We Are Seeking Multiculturalism, Political Awareness, and Intergenerational Support**

*“I dream that we’ve found ways to be in community where we are not simply visitors in each other’s worlds, but actually belong in them.”*

*“Create accountable and meaningful national structures for UUs of color, youth and young adults, and older people. All of these groups talk and are connected. Nobody is isolated, or siloed.”*

These three categories combined drew roughly the same amount of attention as several of the earlier ones, even though they are barely related in their tone.

As has already been noted, individuals cited the need for multiculturalism in a number of different ways, particularly in the clusters of visions related to growth and spiritual development. A particularly meaningful proposition was that we *“create an iPhone app with words to UU songs in different languages. We’ll change the world through singing!”*

Politically, there were a handful of specific suggestions, including: form a UU political action committee; coordinate political action on a national basis; and form UU institutes and think tanks, like the religious right, but involving some of our best thinkers and influential people. Of the various political aspirations that were cited, only one (finding ways for more UUs to hold political office) was cited multiple times.

Finally, people envisioned greater support for all generations, through multi-generational learning and worship; youth and young adult groups, ministry, and empowerment programs; and increased respect for and focus on families. *“Give our future to the younger generations,”* said one participant, *“and trust them to do what’s right.”*

### **We Are Seeking New Models of Stewardship**

Several groups and people referred to the need for a greater sense of stewardship and generosity. But a Community Conversation involving mostly people of color had some innovative suggestions in this area. *“Change the stewardship model so it’s not congregationally based, but is more communal,”* they said. *“The current model*



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*disenfranchises poorer or non-congregational communities. Consider the possibility of fundraising **partnerships**, when congregations raise funds in relationship to other communities. In this way we could share our resources, more closely approaching an indigenous philosophy of ownership.”*

### **Other Reflections**

Other visions of the future appeared much less frequently. Six summary sheets referenced the need for leadership development, and another three dreamed about enhanced educational and programming support from the UUA. One person imagined a cyber-community that, unlike the Church of the Larger Fellowship, would actively invite people—or be a gateway—to an in-person community. A couple of groups talked about the need to respect the worth and dignity of every congregation, fellowship, or UU community. One participant talked about the importance of empowering people to make commitments on behalf of the congregation, speaking perhaps to a need to find ways of making our decision making process more flexible.

Finally, we end with a single aspiration in its entirety—not because its content is more important, but because it may point to a way that we can combine our principles, our passions, and our intellect in a manner that amplifies our power, influence, and capacity to be the change we want to see in the world.

#### **Sybelle’s Dream**

*I dream of a world in which UUs have led the way in abolishing the death penalty; and here’s how we did it:*

- 1) Members of our congregation partnered with prisoners, listening to them until we had a sense of who they really were.*
- 2) We recorded their stories, and shared them with every UU congregation in the country.*
- 3) A large number of congregations started discussion groups.*
- 4) The UUA forged partnerships with attorneys, other faiths, and organizations that work on this issue, so UU congregations and communities could learn and understand the social and political history and issues, and open their minds to options for intervening in the system.*
- 5) We moved to action, inviting interfaith partners to join with us.*
- 6) The UUA allocated money to help pay for lobbying. They organized ‘yellow love people’ who demonstrated and made things happen.*

*I can easily imagine all of this. Please, may it be so.*





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### **A Vision from the Meaning Making Team**

Up until now, this report has focused on patterns, themes, and key learnings that our six-person Meaning Making Team extracted from the hundreds of summaries that were submitted over the course of the Gathered Here initiative. But during the meeting, the team was asked to forge a picture of their own preferred future, informed by all that they had read, reflected on, and learned from others.

The team answered these questions:

- **What is *your* highest and best image for the future of our faith?**
- **What bold, provocative dreams have you collectively forged after your extensive reflections?**
- **What dreams do you have that, if realized, would enable Unitarian Universalism to amplify its most positive qualities while stretching to achieve its highest, most positive potential?**

Their statement is simple, yet elegant and profound:

*We Unitarian Universalists envision a life filled with compassion for all, shared in beloved community, and lived in a just world. We commit ourselves to pursuing this vision faithfully, passionately, and humbly. We invite all who share our vision to join us in this spiritual journey.*

This soaring vision is within our reach. We have already taken steps toward it by sharing our stories and acting together. This initiative provides a potential template for continuing this work and reaching our shared aspirations—together.



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### SECTION THREE: APPENDICES

#### Appendix A: Planning Team

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### **Appendix B: Demographic Analysis of Reported Participants**

See related Excel document entitled “Final Gathered Here Demographic Survey Results – 10-2-2012.pdf”.