



EMERGING MINISTRIES CASE STUDY | SPRING 2015

Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives

Spiritual Practice, Sustainability, Social Change

Case Study: UU Community Cooperatives

Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives is a non-profit organization grounded in Unitarian Universalism that grows intentional housing communities of spiritual practice, sustainability, and social change. They are located in Boston, Massachusetts. Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives currently supports a fully functioning intentional living community, the Lucy Stone Cooperative, and is in the process of starting another community that will hopefully purchase a house and start another co-op in 2015.

Overview

While Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives (UUCC) is the parent organization for the Lucy Stone Cooperative (LSC), they are two different types of organization. UUCC is a 501(c)3 with a governing board and LSC is a housing cooperative that serves its members, the surrounding neighborhood, its friends and supporters and the wider Unitarian Universalist, progressive religious and cooperative movements. LSC is a group equity cooperative, meaning the members who live there do not own the real estate, but rent from the parent non-profit, UUCC, which owns the property.

The Lucy Stone Cooperative has three main circles of accountability: Unitarian Universalism, cooperatives in Boston, and the neighborhood of Roxbury. UUCC shares these circles except for the neighborhood, as expansion to new houses may occur in other parts of the greater Boston area. Some of this accountability is financial: many UUCC donors are UU, UUCC has received grants from the UU Funding Program and their mortgage holder is the Cooperative Fund of New England. These accountabilities are also informed by values and relationships. Both UUCC and LSC are dedicated to living out Unitarian Universalist values and tradition, using cooperative models and forming active community building relationships with their neighbors.

The residents of LSC are committed to living UU values in the ways they interact with one another, and in the practices of their house. They seek to live sustainably, eating vegetarian meals, composting and growing their own vegetables in their garden. They gather for Sunday evening potlucks and spiritual singing which friends, board members and community members can join. They also attend and host trainings focused on aspects of social change such as anti-racism work. UUCC also provides inspiration to the wider Unitarian Universalist community through giving tours to UU youth groups. These tours demonstrate possibilities in terms of alternative living arrangements and methods for practicing Unitarian Universalism beyond congregational life.

Early Planning and Discernment

The two earliest organizers of Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives became interested in the possibility of a Unitarian Universalist housing cooperative in 2008 and got situated to make such an idea come to fruition. They attended a co-op workshop in June 2008 and moved into a co-op together in August 2008 to gain experience. After a conference on co-ops in November of 2008 they began thinking “we can really do this!” In 2009 a larger planning team of six was gathered and began meeting. The primary way this group prepared themselves to start a UU housing co-op was through one-on-one conversations with a wide variety of folks who had expertise or experience to share. They sat down with UU leaders, affordable housing activists, co-op founders, fundraising professionals, and possible donors and investors. These conversations made a huge difference in their success both in terms of gaining information and building social capital. As one LSC member put it, “We had a shitty website and no swag, but we had a million conversations.” Indeed the six people on the planning team had 50-60 individual conversations over the first year of organizing.

Another step the organizers took early on was to gather an intentionally diverse planning team. They put together a team of six people; three UUs and three non-UUs. They also paid attention to racial demographics, making sure that half their team consisted of people of color. Over time they began to realize that Unitarian Universalists were more invested in the idea of a UU co-op, so the religious composition of the group changed. The planning team ran by consensus and tried to balance spirituality and justice-focused conversations with the practical to-do list, though sometimes the to-do list won out. They incorporated singing into many meetings to increase spiritual connection and found a helpful combination of accountability and grace as people took on the difficult work of raising funds, buying property and creating a legal structure for their organization. Between the fall of 2009, when serious organizing started, and the winter of 2010 when the house was purchased, they had frequent meetings, phone calls to check in with each other, job jots and offers to help each other with the work that needed getting done.

In addition to getting situated and being intentional with their process, the planning team had an Advisory Committee made of important UU leaders, neighborhood leaders, and co-op leaders. Other key partnerships included Boston Community Cooperatives, on whose board one of the original founders served, and Beaufort House, which was a cooperative house that several of LSC’s first housemates had lived in. After considering becoming part of Boston Community Cooperatives, they ultimately decided to form their own organization, and received free legal assistance from Lawyer’s Clearinghouse. They also had a relationship with First Parish Milton-Unitarian Universalist, which served as their fiscal sponsor for the UU Funding Panel grant.

Fundraising and Financial Sustainability

The cost of purchasing the eleven-bedroom house that is now the Lucy Stone Cooperative was \$375,000 and involved a \$300,000 mortgage through the Cooperative Fund of New England, a fund that lends exclusively to co-ops with the hopes of supporting a more democratic economy. They also received \$140,000 from allied lenders, individual and institutional partners who invested at low interest rates. These loans ranged from \$5,000 – \$25,000 with an interest rate of 3% over five years and they were personally solicited through relationships the planning team built through conversations. This \$440,000 total included the cost of the house, closing costs and renovations.

Along with loans and investments, a good deal of money has been raised through donations and personal outreach as well as grants from the UU Funding Program. This money goes toward mission-based growth and programs. The UU Funding Program provided nearly \$20,000 in grants over two years to go toward leadership development, marketing costs, conference registration (such as the annual co-op conference or UUA General Assembly) and trainings focused on community organizing, popular education and anti-racism. Donations also come in through personal asks and annual fundraising parties. The first of such parties happened in 2009 at First Church in Jamaica Plain, Unitarian Universalist and they raised \$14,000 from the 170 people in attendance. Each member of the planning team committed \$500 to the effort, which was a significant amount for many of them. They also solicited another \$4,000 before the event to increase the willingness of others in attendance to give.

The nice thing about a housing cooperative is that the rent paid by residents covers operating expenses which include the mortgage payments, paying off debt and making capital improvements, plus administrative fees. Funds raised through means other than rent go toward programs and trainings and expansion of the organization. The UCC team and core planning team for the next co-op are currently working on raising the funds to buy their next property, relying on relationships built through their first round of fundraising and expanding to ask new donors and investors to support this project now that the model is a proven success.

Successes

The biggest success of UUCC so far is that the Lucy Stone Cooperative is purchased, renovated, and full of committed members. Or, as someone put it during the interview “we actually have a house! We did it!” To go from a dream to the reality of a fully functioning Unitarian Universalist living cooperative is no small feat. They have met all their benchmarks financially and surpassed budget expectations every year they have been operating.

However, UUCC has more to be proud of than the existence of LSC. They have also succeeded in becoming a multigenerational community, with members ranging in age from 11 to 68, despite often being pegged as a young adult community. They have developed relationships with their neighbors through hosting an annual barbeque on the historical Lucy Stone’s birthday, at which they see familiar faces each year. Their youth group tours are also a success, inspiring younger Unitarian Universalists to dream up innovative ways to live into their faith and showing them that being an adult can take many forms, including communal living.

A further success is how their existence has shifted the way Unitarian Universalism talks about itself and about ministry beyond congregations. This shift includes getting UUs to consider investing in new UU ministries, which was surprisingly difficult to do during their first round of fundraising. As one person put it, “people would rather donate \$1,000 than invest \$5,000,” but now that feeling is changing because of UUCC’s financial success. The organizers of UUCC have shown themselves and others that faithful risk is important and have developed a spirit of faithfulness to their mission and willingness to take risks that has allowed for their success and will fuel their expansion.

Challenges and Setbacks

Though they have had much success, getting the Lucy Stone Cooperative up and running was incredibly challenging for the planning team. The amount of time required to raise funds, find the property and actually get to the point of purchase was immense and required incredible commitment from the planning team. Then, their first offer on a house was not accepted and they feared their second offer would also be rejected. There were a variety of legal and logistical difficulties on the seller’s side that left the team wondering if they had made a good investment. Once those had been dealt with they had to confront the basics of living in the house, from figuring out a food system to dealing with the smell of raw sewage in the basement. There were no showers at first, no clear system for equitable division of rent, and the house went almost a month without consistent food supplies.

Once LSC had been purchased in December of 2010 and housemates had moved in in February of 2011, the purpose of the planning team became less clear and eventually shifted to becoming the governing Board of UUCC. During this time of transition, the group struggled with what they called “Founder’s Syndrome.” The founders were excited when the new housemates moved in thinking “now we’ll have seven more people to share the workload!” but the understandings of the folks moving in were different than the founders. They had to address power dynamics and work hard to make LSC an equal home for all inhabitants. At first there was some tension between new housemates and the planning team as to who had the authority to make decisions about house life and who had responsibility to fix problems. But a major milestone in dealing with the founders syndrome came when the Board hired a strategic planner for a day and all housemates, board members and other community members spent the day sifting through the mission vision and purpose of UUCC as separate from LSC.

One challenge for everyone involved, from planners to founding housemates to newly arrived members, was grappling with the distance between ideals and realities. All along the way there were times of grieving over letting go of original ideas or big dreams for what the house would be due to practical logistics, limited time resources and the differing opinions among everyone involved. For example, the group was excited about being a multigenerational house that included families, but the logistics of which rooms were available at any given time made that difficult. However, they do now house a parent and child at the Lucy Stone Cooperative, and that has moved the house more firmly into multigenerational life.

Future Directions

The most obvious step that UUCC is taking in terms of future directions is planning to purchase a new house to turn into another UU living cooperative. The core team for planning that house has formed and they have plans to purchase property in 2015. This expansion is exciting and further clarifies the parent organization status of the Unitarian Universalist Community Cooperatives organization.

This expansion is part of a five-year plan that was set in June 2012 after a daylong meeting. Along with starting one or two more houses by 2017, the plan includes expanding the financial and governance infrastructure, expanding outreach and communications with the wider community, formalizing structures for partnerships, deepening spiritual practices and cultivating a diverse community dedicated to anti-oppressive learning. Now, two years into the five year plan, they’ve hit their benchmarks and have completed many of their goals from creating a UUCC website and logo to writing a working board manual to creating a capital improvements committee for the LSC property.

As this organization moves forward they continue to ask big questions about how to use the power they are gaining. Recognizing the “place at the table” they have within Unitarian Universalism, housemates and Board members intentionally ask themselves “what do we want to do with that voice?” As they expand, this organization will no doubt continue to ask challenging questions of themselves as they seek to live fully into their mission of growing intentional housing communities engaged in spiritual practice, sustainability and social change.