

PROVOCATIVE PROPOSALS: MIRRORS AND GUIDEPOSTS
FROM A PROCESS OF APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY
SPRING 2009

In January and February 2009, First UU's Transition Team held two all-congregational "Appreciative Inquiry" exercises. In addition, the Team facilitated "AI" in several small groups. Approximately 140 members and friends participated. In each AI session, participants interviewed each other in pairs, recording each others' responses to four questions:

1. *Tell about a time at First UU when you felt the most motivated and excited.*
2. *What do you most value about First UU?*
3. *What three wishes do you have for our congregation's future?*
4. *What are the most valuable gifts the church can give?*

Then, each interview pair joined another pair to distill common themes and note divergences. Individual responses and group themes were collected and turned over to the Writing Team, which distilled from them the Provocative Proposals.

Provocative Proposals are written as aspirations, as if it is a few months or years from now, when they have become reality. There are three purposes to this:

- a. Provide the congregational a mirror so the best of our past can guide our future;
- b. Provide the Board guideposts for change based on our best qualities;
- c. Provide prospective ministerial candidates an intimate portrait of our congregation.

The Provocative Proposals, however, are not the only result of the AI process. In *doing* AI, participants reconnected with "what we do right" and the associated emotions.

Finally, remember that the Provocative Proposals have been generated *by the congregation*. Their sequence and their content reflect what the congregation said at this time, in response to the questions above. As is to be expected, the Writing Team found that amid widespread congruence, not all comments fit easily among each other. The Team has tried its best to take this into account without diluting the results. The members of the Transition Team and the Writing Team thus hope that in what follows, you will find reflections of some of yourself and some of others, as well as guideposts to a future that will both comfort and challenge.

Worship

The congregation has grown to love our new minister, who is an outstanding preacher with gifts of intellect, imagination and insight, eloquence and command of the pulpit. Our minister's sermons draw from diverse intellectual and theological traditions as well

as personal experience. They provide sustenance and inspiration for mind and soul. They foster spirituality, compassion and community.

We look forward to the special ritual services that mark the milestones in our annual passage through the seasons. Participation of members, both adults and children, helps build and strengthen our bonds to one another.

In the sanctuary on Sunday mornings, the strength of the music and sermons melt away our preoccupations, inspiring us to go forth again and reach for our best selves, individually and as a community.

Culture and Community

If asked, "What's First UU like?" the first words from members and newcomers alike are likely to be "Generous, welcoming and driven to serve."

First UU is a magnet for new members of all ages, races, sexual orientations, socio-economic classes and spiritual beliefs. Everyone feels comfortable being open about their identities and beliefs.

Chalice Circles and other small-group ministries support friendships, service activities and spiritual growth among longstanding and new members.

Our professional staff, full-time and part-time, includes ministers, religious educators, music leaders and support staff for volunteer activities, office and facility management, community service and social action. The congregation is proud to support the staff with competitive salaries and benefit packages that reflect our culture of generosity and allow us to retain top talent. Our culture of generosity allows us to do this without endangering our financial stability; rather, our top staff becomes an asset in maintaining that stability.

Progressive Voice

Of all liberal churches in southeast Texas, First UU is the preeminent voice for peace, social justice and inclusive religious thinking. Our public stance makes us a beacon for all who seek a liberal center.

The congregation is proud of standing up for liberal values and for the rights and aspirations of under-served and under-represented populations. We enthusiastically support active ministerial and lay involvement in Houston's progressive community.

First UU offers an exciting calendar of public-interest programs, including as “brown bag” lunch talks and other speaker events, workshops and participation in public radio and television programs, all of which proclaim our values and draw new members.

Music

First UU continues and has expanded its long, proud tradition of excellent, diverse music. We have a half-time music director, keyboardist and well-established choirs for children and youth.

Our hosting of music groups, from visiting and guest performers to homegrown and Houston-based talent, has gained us a reputation among music lovers as “the music church.”

Community musicians are eager to perform in our acoustically excellent sanctuary, and they relish the reception their performances receive from our members and the public.

Social Action

Our congregation enthusiastically supports our widely admired social action programs. The congregation is knowledgeable about and proud of our shared commitment to community service.

A paid coordinator trains volunteers, and matches opportunities with members and friends.

We see social action programs as a way to live out our UU values and to serve the urban neighborhoods in which First UU is located. We support both ongoing projects and one-time events, affording everyone the opportunity to get involved.

The Emergency Aid Coalition, the annual gay pride parade, the diverse volunteer activities on Second Saturdays as well as one-time events and activities are all sources of energy and community. Our facility-use calendar is full from groups who use First UU for meetings, with an emphasis on giving space to groups not always welcome elsewhere, as in the past for H.A.T.C.H.

Leadership and Stewardship

An effective governance structure is enthusiastically supported by the congregation. It clearly defines the roles and responsibilities of the Board, the staff and volunteers. In accordance with our congregational covenant, members communicate openly and honestly with the Board and minister(s) through a variety of avenues.

Strong leadership by clergy and volunteers—and great programs— attract new members. We embrace a process of leadership and ministries development for volunteers that promotes involvement in congregational activities. As a community, we are responsible stewards of our church's resources, including

- facilities
- staff
- finances
- volunteers

Spiritual Growth and Religious Education

First UU members consciously engage in lifelong spiritual growth. Worship services, lifespan education, study and discussion groups and small-group ministries all contribute to our individual and communal spiritual maturation. We specially emphasize liberal religious education for children and youth, while consciously protecting them through policies, procedures, and training for all who work with them.

Submitted to the Board, April 15, 2009

Writing Team: Thorpe Butler, Mary Koch, Lydia Luz, Evan Michaelides.

Transition Team: Rita Saylor (chair), Dick Doughty (liaison to the Writing Team), Emily Wagner, Carolyn Leap, Barbara Nelson. (Ex-officio: Carol Burrus, Al Sevcik.)

All comments recorded for Appreciative Inquiry are available at www.firstuu.org.