

CSM Assessment of UUFM Children’s Faith Development Program

March, 2024

In February and March, 2024, the Committee on Shared Ministry invited the congregation of the UU Fellowship to share their perceptions of our Children’s Faith Development program. An online survey (results attached as Appendix I) was completed by 20 people; Table Conversations were held early in March with four groups (results attached as Appendix II), one of which included two children in the program; and two meetings were held with the Director of Children’s Faith Development.

One limitation of the online survey was that it elicited few responses from parents or youth currently in the program (1 parent, 1 youth, 1 sibling of a child in the program). There are 28 active households with 51 children eligible for the program, and 26 eligible youth, all of whom were invited by email to complete the survey. Perhaps the low response rate is a measure of satisfaction (following the English common law dictum that Silence is consent), or perhaps it is a measure of disengagement and lack of interest. We do not have enough information to draw a conclusion.

Findings

1) Numbers

- a. It takes 2 volunteers to staff a room, whether the Nursery or a classroom. Current attendance numbers are too low to permit age-separation into separate rooms, even if we had more volunteers to staff them. Yet some of the older children indicated that they would prefer more “older” activities.
- b. Age breakdown of current eligible children:

Age	5/6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
#	6	2	1	5	6	5	10	1	5	1	4	5

While these cohorts might change as they progress through the years, it appears that there is a natural grouping (if we had enough volunteers, enough space, and enough regular attendance) for an elementary group (9 children, ages 5-8), a middle school group (16 children, ages 9-11), a junior high group (11 children, ages 12-13) and a high school/youth group (15 youth, ages 14-17).

- c. Constraints on attendance
 - i. Co-parenting means that some children are not in their UU household every Sunday.
 - ii. For some children (especially those who are active in extra-curriculars) and for some parents, Sundays conflict with other activities or Sundays are the only day *not* scheduled for activities.

- iii. Younger children accompany their parents to CFD classes; some older children exercise their independence by not accompanying their parents.
- d. Recruiting: How to make program more visible, to children, to parents, to volunteers, to congregation at large. Families (especially ones that are new to the community) often “church shop” over the Summer. Perhaps schedule an open house (in Sept? In late August?), advertised both to the congregation (and congregation’s children) *and* to the broader community (perhaps on community bulletin boards on Facebook?). Might consider walking in summer community parades and throwing candy (with an invitation attached).

2) Programs

- a. OWL (Our Whole Lives)—Several respondents expressed a desire for this program. Perhaps it might be an idea to run the adult curriculum at same time (different floors) as Youth, for both the parents and for other adults in the congregation.
- b. Coming of Age—This is a program for Youth which involves mentoring/cross-generational engagement. Several parents of children formerly in the program mentioned this as a desirable offering.
- c. Youth Cons and other activities that collaborate with congregations in region should be explored.
- d. Since Sundays are problematic for many, schedule more activities (intergenerational?) on other days. Service learning/social action/environmental action/volunteer activity in the community for Youth group could be particularly suited to this, as well as intergenerational social activities (like bowling/bingo/Saturday hikes). Such activities should be advertised to children from outside the congregation, as well.

3) Communication

- a. “Big Question”—Draw the rest of the congregation into the children’s activity. Highlight how children’s activities in chapel mesh with adults’ activities in sanctuary, how the big question of the month is being addressed, how Kiva is being used, etc.—Bulletin Board? Table in Fellowship Hall to display children’s activities?
- b. Preferred communication to parents is by e-mail & automated follow-up announcements.
- c. Posting our activities on Facebook and Instagram should be cultivated to reach out to the community.
- d. Ideally, CFD Director’s role should be to direct, not necessarily to lead everything. In other words, managing and directing the activity of volunteers. But this requires a stable of volunteers ready to carry out the activities.

Conclusions

There is general and widespread support for the CFD program and for the work that the Director has been doing. The congregation sees possibilities for growing and deepening the program, but

that will require rebuilding much of what the congregation (and society more generally) lost during the COVID pandemic. This is a time, not for panic, but for building anew (and perhaps differently).

Appendix I: CFD Survey Results 3/5/2024

N=20

Name:

Diane Langland, Sadie Anderson, Nancy Blethen, Jeremiah, Beth Serrill, Alicia Bayer, Deb Fitzloff, Sean Easton, Diane Dobitz, Karen Knox, Nancy Cramblit, Helen Scott, Penny Herickhoff, Linda Ganske, Dave Schostag, Susan Chambers, Cathi Fouchi, Victoria Bayer, Victoria Bayer, Tony Filipovitch

Category:

- *Parent of child currently in program* 1
- *Parent of child formerly in program* 6
- *Youth* 1
- *Congregant* 10
- *Sibling of child in program* 1
- *Former member* 1

Curricula

- i) *UU Values/Principles* 14
- ii) *Nature-Based Lessons* 5
- iii) *Spirituality* 4
- iv) *Social Action* 7
- v) *World Faith Traditions* 6
- vi) *Our Whole Lives/Sexuality* 15
- vii) *Coming of Age* 6

b) Is any of this content more appropriate at a particular age?

- Of course content of any of these subjects should be age appropriate. Our space is very warm and inviting, joy comes out of that room but I'm not aware of the programming that was offered on that day.
- Junior high / 10-18
- *For tweens and teens, social justice and coming of age*
- *I'm honestly not sure / Well of course, but without reviewing the curriculum itself, it is hard to say*
- *OWL? / OWL ages 10 through late teens / Teens – Sexuality / What I know about Our Whole Lives/Sexuality would be most appropriate for teens / maybe OWL*

- Teens for Our Whole Lives and Coming of Age
- all ages / No, I think it's all relevant at any age / Content can be created as age appropriate no matter the subject area. / UU Values every age; Social Action every age; / OWL and World Faith are for any age
- Youngest - Values,
- teens & youth - world religions;
- Coming of Age is for Youth

c) Is there anything specific you'd like to see offered that is not on this list?

- This may fall under social action but service learning/volunteer opportunities in the community for youth would be great to incorporate into the children's faith development program.
- Maybe why are we here and why are we different than some other Sunday schools?
- I also wanted to add Nature Based lessons to my choices. At one time we had very involved families, members of the Fellowship and children/youth who gathered at UUFM for different kinds of projects that created community, etc. Patti Ruskey was our CFD person at the time. I suggest we ask her what more or different could be done that draws parents to want their children connected to our UU values and community. There may be room for more social and community building activities. Fair Trade was in the curriculum in the past and taught in several lessons. We are a Fair Trade Church. What does that mean to children --- and even members?
- Teaching and action Collaboration with regional UU churches - cooperative approach
- Think list is long enough - Did visit a holiday service in the Cities where the children did a lot of the participation - not sure if we have the numbers but sometimes children might remember their part later?

d) What stands out about the programming we offer to families.

- I think the OWL program is great.
- The well educated and qualified CFD Director / Macey's care and expertise / Macey has grown into such a strong CFD director over the years. Does she have opportunities to connect with and learn from other CFD directors? And also share her learning?
- diversity, inclusion, social justice, safe space for all
- It is shared in a welcoming affirming setting.
- The programming has always seem well thought through.
- Don't know enough about what we are offering - maybe that's part of issue? / my kids are no longer in the program and so I am not sure what is being offered today / Sorry to not know and admit to be frustrated that I can't offer more help / I have not been very involved lately so really can't say
- Seems to be a good variety, offered at various times/days
- Decline in family engagement over past years
- The great effort you take in attracting children
- Values of Unitarianism and Universalism--God (and revelation) is everywhere and spirituality is based on love and trust, not fear and retribution.

Communication:

a) How is our programming best communicated to you?

- | | | |
|------------------------------|-----------|----------|
| i) <i>Email</i> | 14 | |
| ii) <i>text</i> | 1 | |
| iii) <i>social media</i> | 1 | |
| iv) <i>physical bulletin</i> | | 2 |
| v) <i>Weekly</i> | 2 | |

b) How far in advance would you like to be aware/reminded of what is happening?

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----------|----------|
| vi) <i>1 week</i> | 5 | |
| vii) <i>2 weeks</i> | | 6 |
| viii) <i>beginning of month</i> | 6 | |
- other beginning of month with reminder / NA, but weekly reminder of upcoming programming / week or 2, but reminder the day before*

Welcoming:

a) How did you become aware of our programming for children and families?

- The lovely book readings every Sunday and singing kids out!
- *I'm a member of the UU / Former member / This has been strongly supported by our congregation in all of the 22 years I've been a member.*
- Many years ago we saw a newspaper add that caught our attention
- *Started coming to church / by attending on Sundays*
- Facebook
- *Weekly Update / Weekly updates / Weekly update - wondering in my mind where else / what media it should be out there? / I would like to say the Weekly, but activities are often buried within Macey's weekly article. They should be front and center, listed first. Not need to click through. / Weekly update - but some mention mostly the same every week - I do like to know what's happening for the week and our staff messages.*
- By becoming a member of UUFM and volunteering in the CFD program.
- *I sought out UUFM a few years ago and saw that there was children's programming on the website*
- Web site, worship + visible participation in community events
- *always aware*
- *A member (Mary Kelley) called and asked to visit us, knowing that we had young children (our oldest was in first or second grade)*

b) How do other families in the community become aware of faith-development programming for children and families?

- I don't know, is there a community bulletin that lists options?
- You could post flyers in places that share the values of the UU. Public libraries, Coffee Hag, 410 project, CADA, etc.
- Church attendance and talking with neighbors and community members
- Church harvest festivals
- I'm not sure they currently do other than word of mouth / Wish I knew - ? word of mouth ? - pass experience within our own families?
- children share their excitement with their friends
- I'm not sure. / I don't know / Don't know and would be good to find out. / No clue
- I don't know but think it might be through church web sites and word of mouth. Our section of "Faith Development for Children" on the UUFM website needs to be updated as Rev. Rita's name is still included.
- Newspaper/Social Media
- Probably from our website
- Possibly more visibility in the community and social media presence.
- Word of mouth & on-line search by seekers
- Don't know and would be good to find out. Do we know of any other Fellowships - Churches that have found any success?
- We should do a reach out to all those families that were with us prior to COVID, some have not returned and we miss them
- From other families/friends

c) What ways are important for staff to welcome families to UUFM

- Ease into making them feel welcome, needed, and heard.
- Meet families where they are in their spiritual journey. Also, providing transportation.
- Welcoming smiles and words as well as knowledge of the program and consistent presence on Sundays and other events
- Be kind and don't make assumptions on what people are looking for..
- Greet and chat, make a point to be inclusive and meet needs
- be interested . . . give them time and attention in various settings
- I was always impressed when I received a postcard in the mail.
- Don't know - = followup with any interest for any questions - appreciate their original contact / interest
- Macey is present in the entry when families come in and she connects with them. When Rev. Diana can take some time to be part of Children's Chapel so they can get to know her more personally and ask questions, etc.
- I wonder if an "open house" for our past families who were so active before Covid would respond and come? Or if any other families would? If takes effort on all of us to let people know UUFM is here for them and their families.
- Macey greeting in the lobby, minister doing a home visit, brochure with brief description of the CFD programs, each Sunday having activities for each age group
- Friendly face on Sunday am; occasional emails/texts, I suppose
- I think the staff already does a great job of this

- Visibility and warm outreach
- I would like to see more family activities, bowling, bingo/game nights. I know this all takes time, but perhaps a weekly Weekly article is not necessary.
- Maybe name and interest recognition in addition to maybe seeing what is most interesting and important for both the children and parents? Which I think you are starting to do via this email - thanks!!!
- Staff does a good job greeting on Sundays. Not aware of weekly contacts
- Explaining that no one will be converted, either trying to get them to believe in God or stop believing in god
- Friendliness, connecting with children, "What is important to you? How can we be with you on your journey?"

d)What ways are important for member of the congregation to welcome families to UUFM

- Meet families where they are in their spiritual journey. Also, providing transportation.
- Meet, be friendly, accommodate needs (dietary, environmental, sensory, psychological, etc.)
- by recalling the courage it requires
- I'm not sure. I'm not a very socially at-ease person. I appreciated confident friendliness when I was new, but that's more manner of welcome than content.
- Get to know who, where from, interests, background
- We need to share by word of mouth and let families know how much we have to offer to parents/children as they raise their families and grow up. I remember once connections were made through adult members writing messages to the children/youth and then after some weeks/months the adults let the youth know who they were.
- Other families greeting in the lobby, members joining them during coffee/luncheon, introducing them to others in the congregation, especially other families
- Sitting with new people/families during coffee hour; learn their names
- Members are incredibly welcoming!
- We can each Invite new families & be involved in relationships with our children and youth
- Participate in the above activities; interact with families during coffee hour
- Name recognition - what's important to them - what other activities they are involved in- what might be their day job - ...
- I try to approach kids and engage them in conversations, would be nice to have some planned interaction
- Friendliness, connecting with children, "What is important to you? How can we be with you on your journey?"

2) Involvement: How can we invite you to participate in the religious education of our children? (Select any that apply)

- *Serve as a classroom teacher*

- *Share talents as special classroom guest* 7
- *Guest reader for Story for All Ages* 11
- *CFD Committee member* 2
- *Help with Nursery* 1

Appendix II: CFD Table Talk Notes 3/3/2024

N=8

Content

- My kids remember the Youth Cons fondly—made good friends, have continued in contact (even though have not continued as active UUs).
- Community experiences for whole family (“Blue Skunks”)
 - Has to be more than Sunday morning
 - Halloween parties, dances, etc.
- Coming of Age program (mentoring/secret friend for youth) (ii)
- Used to have groups of parents & kids who relied on us
 - But younger kids are now teens and resistant to continuing
 - Younger kids travel with parents from LeSueur or St. Peter, but older kids don’t want to.
 - Sunday morning is “only time off” for many youth, given all their other activities (sports, clubs, school, etc.)
 - Do things *not* on Sundays
- Maybe connect with other churches that have child/youth groups
 - May have problems of them trying to “convert” us
 - Something like Summer “Bible Camp” with others, around other themes—environment, perhaps.
- Have to have CFD, since if people happen to come, they *need* to have it available.
- Can’t say which curriculum to use—don’t know what is in each of them.
- Need to focus on activities—*fun!*
- Selection of books for Story for All Ages is excellent—and lessons in Children’s Chapel are built around the themes for each month.
- OWL
 - There’s a new couple from NH who have been trained in OWL

Communication

- Not sure Weekly is best use of CFD Director’s time (although it *is* well done).
- Intergenerational activity can’t be announced only in CFD Director’s column.
- Advertising at University (people who would welcome liberal religious education). Not sure what medium—signs? Reporter ads?
- Need right message for adults—if adults come, they’ll bring their kids.
- Focus on spirituality is good, but maybe more “informational/issues/ideas” activities [This comment seemed more directed to Worship than to CFD]

Welcoming

- *Intergenerational* activities—but need advanced warning to get it onto my schedule.
 - Bowling

- Bingo
- Saturday hikes
- We're here because we initially came for Sunday School
- It's a big part of our budget, but we don't see many kids
- Nursery looks so inviting. CFD Director is caretaker of the room.
- Our kids feel like "outsiders"—need a "home." Kids are pressured by peers to conform. They need a group that feels welcoming.
- Walk in community parades & throw candy (New Ulm, N. Kato, etc.). Jerin Ostermann will volunteer to help with this.

Other Comments

- Maybe not focus on congregational growth—focus on quality of offerings (and then growth will come on its own)
- "I suspect this may be one of the primary tasks of faith communities like ours now and in the years ahead: being a place that can hold climate grief without letting go of beauty and joy as well. We can be a place where we help deepen connections between humans and the planet even as we experience the effects of generations of disconnection, of perceiving nature as a resource to be used rather than the sacred life it is. We can allow room for the emotions involved, while also taking action to minimize the harm and to adapt to what cannot be avoided." Minister's Message, 2/28/24 Says it all.
- Finding peace in the chaos.

UUFM CSM Youth/CFD Program Survey Table Talk Notes of 3/3/2024

Child who attended that morning

- 4th Grade
- What she liked: All of it.
- The BEST part: The choice! (poly. clay)
- What's missing? "The Ship Room"

Parent whose child attends:

- prefers communication by email because it is searchable as time passes
- leads a group of girl scouts that meets at UUFM on a weeknight and noted people don't really understand [what we are]. Observed one youth seeing the signage and then calling UUFM "the pride church"
- Were they aware they could bring a friend? Yes and then parent and child mentioned some possible friends they might ask

Child who attended that morning

- 7th Grade/12 years old

- Best part: activities
- What should change? At age 12 some of the traditional opening circle activities “feel a bit childish”.
- What to keep:
 - 7 Principals (talk about them, don’t sing them or use the instruments)
 - Kiva Coins (talk about the program a bit)
 - Check-In Option (not rocks and shells)
 - The BIG Question
- Maybe decide which way opening will proceed based on the children/youth who are attending that morning?
- I mentioned the dream/wish to have several of that age group and showed her the Youth Room space.

Table of 5 UUFM members:

- Ideas for communication of program to general membership:
 - On screen announcements
 - Macey rings bell at coffee and announces The Big Question of that morning and/or points out the bulletin board content. Brief. Simple.
 - Screen shot of bulletin board or some other way to remind us to look when we come down for snacks/coffee and walk and talk right past it.
 - Displays of student work on one of the back tables.
- Sharing/reading a book to the general gathering! GOOD! HELPFUL! UPLIFTING! Especially characters that have a positive message, noted one person.