

Vision for 2013

Imagine a random Sunday in 2013, the plaza is bustling with activity. Who would have thought in 2008 that a bike rack would fit there? Today we expect that about 30% of our worshippers will arrive on bike. Another 30% arrive on foot. And of the 40% arriving by car, many come in carpools (parking has gotten much worse), or are shuttled from a lot downtown. And can we mention downtown? The neighborhood surrounding the church has really changed in five years. Was it really five years ago that the mortgage debacle left the now vibrant Citywalk development on hold? Not to mention what Jack London Square is like these days! Who could have imagined?

The demographers would tell us that the First Unitarian Church of Oakland is a truly multiracial, multicultural congregation now. The percentages of racial and ethnic identities within the church mirror the bay area in many ways. Our staff, our building, our members, our mission have shifted in big and small ways. There is joy in abundance, money in abundance, and a sense of possibility infusing each program ministry.

There is more worship in the course of a week. A weeknight Jazz service draws in pedestrians and commuters who once passed by the church, not knowing what happened inside. The meditation service has really taken hold. And the children and youth are part of every Sunday service, as we have really come to embody the multigenerational part of our vision.

Our religious literacy programs have been highly acclaimed in UU circles, and recently made news. For early learners, families can enroll a child in a Spirit Play class that introduces children to religious language, stories and images through creative play. Parents can send themselves to concurrent workshops that teach family spiritual practices and support a sense of nurture for each parent as a resident theologian. When a family is ready to join in membership of the church and/or participate in a child dedication, there is an orientation session for parents and kids to review the history and hopes that accompany these ritual times in our communal life. Chalice camp continues to be a learning experience for many kids aligned with the church. Now camps are offered during school vacation weeks, too. Not just during summer vacation.

Fifth and sixth graders have a once a month youth group that meets on Saturdays for 3 hours. It's a time when they have fun and learn about worship in the UU tradition by preparing for elements of a coming liturgy. Some students learn about multi-media, some write and perform plays or music. They work as team members with adults to build skills, participate in their own faith formation and interact with mentors who nurture their gifts and talents. Twice a year, they have overnight retreats, just for fun.

Seventh and eight graders can spend a year exploring their faith in a coming of age program that culminates in a rite of passage celebration. They meet with trained mentors for instructional time, and with lay ministers who support them in their explorations of what they believe a program that mirrors the adult religious literacy path where history, heritage are sources of inspiration and each learner gains skills in discerning “what is true and right in life” rooted in traditions of critical inquiry. Heady isn’t it? But we see now how it builds on the foundation of our Unitarian heritage in a dynamic way!

Our learning doesn’t begin and end with religious literacy, though. We have programs for all ages that we promote to the public on spirituality and life. Workshops for all ages on current issues in race and politics, science and religion, values clarification (money, sex, relationships, simple living) are perennial favorites. We learn from guest speakers, lay leaders and our ministers. It’s an exciting place to be for the spiritually curious! These events happen when leaders and learners present themselves. Day time, night time, concurrent with a worship service, or over a weekend retreat. There are many options to drop in on, or to commit to for a series of weeks.

The Associates programs really anchor the learning community as leadership development and is accessible for youth and all adults. Skill building and personal growth changes the way we work together, and the Associates programs give people who are dedicating their time to congregational leadership roles a way to integrate service and learning with theological reflection. Each Associates program is different, but the spirit of revitalization is apparent in the eagerness of folks to join these groups as they are known as satisfying lay ministries, and antidotes to burnout in life!

Learning as a life long spiritual practice has created a sense of curiosity, flexibility and openness to change that allows newcomers and long timers to see the benefit of changing one’s mind and opening one’s heart as necessary blessings. A number of people in the congregation have been moved by this religious sense of Universalist hope that they have abandoned stalled careers, and been called into new professions that feel more like a deep vocation. Families that felt isolated by bay area life and pressure now come together for mutual support in resisting the temptations to over work, succumb to addiction and increase debt to keep up with a frantic pace. A new “community place” for stressed out families has become a ministry of the church that serves as a respite for kids and parents in crisis and inspiration for our city.

And that’s another quality of life issue that the church is addressing within and beyond our walls: parents and kids really talking about what’s up, and then putting their hands and hearts together to make a difference. Justice work includes intentional theological reflection and often incorporates people of all ages working side by side. Local and global issues are understood as

interconnected and advocacy, witness, service and transformation projects allow people to enter into the conversation at many practical and boldly strategic points.

There's no membership committee anymore, but the congregation has been known as the friendliest place in town for some time now! Parties, small groups, peer exploration circles and celebrations are plenty. No one goes to everything of course, but there sure is a welcoming place to be with a caring community of aspiration and hope 7 days a week at the corner of 14th and Castro in downtown Oakland.

-Rev. Michelle Favreault