

University Congregational United Church of Christ

**Internal Identity Statement**

May 29, 2007

*This is a description of our sense of who we are as a congregation. Such honest self-description is meant to give us a firm base from which we can move forward. This statement was crafted by the Interim Advisory Committee, and reviewed by the leadership staff and church council.*

**1. BELIEFS:**

We are a Christian church seeking to practice the inclusive love of Jesus. We are part of the United Church of Christ (UCC) and cherish our connections to ecumenical and interfaith movements.

- a) We are a liberal and progressive church, working to respond to the radical message of Jesus. In responding to the radical message of Jesus, we believe that we are conserving the historical passion of Jesus for God and God's Kingdom.
- b) We look to the Bible for truth and guidance, but we do not read the Bible literally.
- c) We are bound together by a covenant that reflects our identity and invites us to seek and respond to God, to welcome everyone, to care for and pray for each other, to promote the growth of our minds and spirits, and to promote justice, peace, and reconciling love as evidence in the gospel of Jesus.
- d) Through our connection to the UCC, we contribute (\$229,500 for 2007) to the global outreach of the Church.
- e) We have not made the "radical message of Jesus" central to our life as a church, nor have we practiced inclusive love as much as we have proclaimed it.

**2. VALUES:**

Love and social and economic justice, as exemplified by the life and teachings of Jesus, are the core values of the congregation. These core values are evident in highly held subordinate values:

- a) Nurturing and caring.
- b) Social and economic justice.
- c) Peace.
- d) Openness and inclusiveness.
- e) Family.
- f) Faithfulness and commitment spiritually, and in intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships.
- g) Integrity.
- h) Environmental stewardship.

### **3. WORSHIP:**

Worship is the “Heart” of our community of faith. Our worship and music are traditional, liturgical, and fairly formal. We use inclusive language, engage our children and youth in worship services, and try to make services welcoming to families and visitors.

- a) We have a strong tradition of congregational hymn singing and well-performed choral and organ music – usually classical Christian, but periodically in other styles.
- b) Our worship may be observed as overly traditional or conservative, and anxieties about use of inclusive language, children in the worship service, or changes in the music programs may be noticed,

### **4. OUR FAITH COMMUNITY**

We welcome believers, seekers, and doubters of all ages into our community, honoring individual faith journeys. We come from varied religious background, including original Congregationalists, UCC, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and other Protestant denominations; or those who are new to Christianity or to an organized church.

- a) Church members are generally well educated, professional, and upper middle class, including some who are wealthy and a few who are less affluent.
- b) We are reluctant about evangelism and proselytizing.
- c) Parish care and community outreach are important ministries within our church.
- d) Our church membership was 835 (April 18, 2007), reflecting a membership decline of 22 percent during the previous eight years.
- e) We are mostly white and not very racially or ethnically diverse. While desiring to be more racially and ethnically diverse, the realities of the community we serve may make this desire impractical.
- f) Our membership includes:
  - i. A community of strong, active families with young children.
  - ii. A small number of active and committed youth.
  - iii. Few university students.
  - iv. The median age of our membership is between 50 and 60 years and is increasing, with one-half of the members having an age over 55.
  - v. Most members live in neighborhoods surrounding the church; however, we also attract people from the Eastside of Lake Washington and further to be part of our faith community.
  - vi. A remarkable number of our members have gone to study in seminaries (currently 14 members), and we have a large contingent of retired clergy.
  - vii. We are open to and affirming of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people in ways few congregations have, and this has become an important part of our

identity. We take pride in being an Open and Affirming congregation. Some members believe that we need to be more inclusive in other ways as well.

## **5. STEWARDSHIP:**

We are blessed with abundant resources in the church community through pledged gifts, donations for building renovations, and gifts for special projects. We urge proportional giving (a percentage of annual resources), with approximately one-third of the annual pledges being about five percent of annual income.

- a) Our middle-class, liberal background influences how we talk about money, ask for it, anticipate its availability, and conserve it.
- b) Talking about and asking for money for the ministry of the church is discomforting for some members, even though they recognize that the majority of the budget funds the church staff. Members and friends involved in the church are the most active in supporting it financially. During the last few years, we have maintained our budget with fewer pledges giving larger amounts to the church.
- c) Over the years, stewardship of our building has received less priority than some other needs of the church. An extremely successful building capital campaign has helped us move away from that trend. We now pride ourselves on our newly renovated facilities, designed and implemented using “green” building practices.
- d) Our building is well used throughout the week, not only by the church but also by outreach ministries and preschool programs.

## **6. HISTORY OF OUR PUBLIC WITNESS:**

We have served the University district of Seattle for over 115 years. During this time, we have been a progressive voice in the city, and our senior ministers have helped sustain that voice and visibility.

- a) Our Open and Affirming policies have attracted local and national attention. During the last ten years, we have been led by a team ministry.
- b) We question whether anything else is attracting comparable attention, whether our visibility has lessened, and, if so, is that a problem.
- c) We question whether we can be a living witness to real issues in the life of this region and in our world.
- d) We care deeply about; social issues; peace, social and economic justice, and homelessness are issues that have recently engaged our interest and activity. Our deliberations and actions on these issues are usually done by small groups, rather than by the church corporately.

## **7. CHRISTIAN EDUCATION:**

In our worship and education programs, we invite each other to celebrate, explore, question, and struggle with what it means to be a Christian. We are strong believers in education and work hard to expand those opportunities.

- a) Currently, we ask families to devote enormous energy to Christian education for their children.
- b) Worship time has been recently changed to allow for a common hour for Christian education for all ages before the service.
- c) We sponsor: an intergenerational church summer camp at Seabeck; weekend retreats for men, women, and youth; and, workshops (a recent one led by a popular religious academic).
- d) Whether our education programs are strong enough for a church our size, or the current structure best meets the needs of believers, seekers, and doubters are open questions. Many parents say that they carry too heavy a burden in children's education. Some members say that the adult Sunday morning program needs to be strengthened, and that we should pay more attention to spiritual practices and strengthening faith.
- e) We do not offer a regular program for adult spiritual formation.

## **8. CHURCH GOVERNANCE:**

Our church is governed by the congregation, who through congregational vote has the final word in major church issues. We manage ourselves through a system of committees, boards, and a church council. Lay members take their responsibilities seriously, focusing primarily on the good and orderly management of the church. Each member has a voice in this church, and there are usually opportunities for debate and change. A shift occurred in the church leadership 15 years ago. This shift opened the opportunity for reflection regarding leadership, and a collegial team-ministry model for pastoral leadership emerged as the church moved toward a more lay-directed structure.

- a) Church committees and boards have small membership and are low in energy.
- b) The council is too large for efficient **decision-making**.
- c) The clergy and church administrative leadership are capable, **effective**, and well-loved by the congregation; however, strong leadership by the clergy tends to be met with resistance.
- d) The clergy team believes that the church leadership needs to be rebalanced if we are to experience transformational change through the leadership of the clergy.
- e) Authority tends to be dispersed, and spontaneity is valued more than strategic planning.

A desire for perfection by the congregation may limit our willingness to grow and truly practice the radical message of Jesus. The church's system favors stability, rather than transformational leadership from lay members or the clergy.