

# Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island

Sharing a spiritual journey of service  
toward a loving and interconnected world.



## Growth Plan

Revised January 20, 2007

# Introduction

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Whidbey Island organized and joined the UUA in 1993. Since then, we grew from the initial 33 charter members to our present membership of 65, an average of over 5% per year. Over the course of 2002, a rift in the congregation, stemming from our rapid transition from a Family to a Program model, caused our membership to dip. However, thanks to our dedicated leadership, a strong core of established members, and an influx of enthusiastic new members, our growth resumed, up 44% since 2003. We remain committed to reach out to those needing liberal religion within our island community.

The demographics of Whidbey Island (population 58,211, 2000 U.S. census) support the probability of our continued growth: the island has higher than normal education levels and numbers of retired persons, artists, and writers. There are no significant alternative liberal children's religious education programs available to island residents. We are the only Unitarian Universalist congregation on the island. The greatest challenge to our ability to grow and prosper is our lack of space; we are about to outgrow the facility in which we are currently meeting, the largest rentable space available, a Lutheran chapel. In order to continue to attract new members, promote community, and accomplish our mission on Whidbey Island, we need a home of our own.

The congregation answered this challenge by purchasing outright 4.1 acres of property near highway 525 north of Freeland, WA. The Building Committee has sponsored a series of work parties to begin site preparation and make the land available for use. UUCWI started holding outdoor services on the property in the summer of 2003 and performed a Native American Blessing of the Land in the summer of 2004. In 2006 the Building Committee presented a proposed site plan and a building concept at a congregational meeting for approval. It passed by an overwhelming majority. The site plan now has county permit

approval, which allows us to begin clearing and site preparation. The working drawings for the building permit application are essentially complete. UUCWI is committed to its building goals.

A home is, however, more than some land and a building. This plan will attempt to show how our organization, goals, and initiatives will work together to build a permanent base for Unitarian Universalists on Whidbey Island.

## How is UUCWI structured?

A Board of Trustees elected by the congregation governs UUCWI. The Board is comprised of seven members of the congregation: the Board President, Secretary, and Treasurer and four two-year trustees. The Board's principal roles are to set policy and provide leadership. The Board oversees all standing committees. Operational issues are delegated to the committees and major decisions are put before the congregation at congregational meetings.

UUCWI is committed to the democratic process and governs itself accordingly. Assertions represented in this document reflect the priorities of the congregation as a whole as developed through congregational surveys and meetings as well as its formal committee structure reporting to the elected Board of Trustees.

We are a growing congregation determined to extend our ministry and message and we have made a commitment together to serve the entire Whidbey Island community.

## Goals for Growth

UUCWI is committed to growth both in numbers of members and friends as well as in our involvement and presence in this community. We see ourselves as a positive force in the world and take seriously the concept of a global perspective applied to local issues. It is our goal to establish a center for liberal religion, social justice, and environmental awareness on Whidbey Island.

We have accomplished 13% average annual membership growth over the past three years and anticipate a growth spike upon completion of our facility. We plan to grow from 65 to at least 112 members over the next five years, assuming the success of our building plan and the implementation of these initiatives. The Board, its Committees, and membership at large are solidly behind these measures and have committed to make growth a congregational priority.

## Initiatives:

### *Community Outreach*

We believe that Whidbey Island contains a rich vein of potential members and friends. It is our goal to shed the mantle of “best kept secret on Whidbey” and get our message out to public. To that end, we have begun to promote ourselves and our programs in the community. We are advertising, sending out press releases, and widening the distribution of our newsletter. Perhaps the most important

enhancement to our visibility is our website: <http://www.whidbey.com/uucwi/>. The site has led many newcomers and visitors to our door and we are proud of it. The Board has also recently charged a new Communications Committee to take a direct leadership role in promoting UUCWI on Whidbey Island.

## *Attract and Welcome Visitors*

A twenty-minute ferry ride across Puget Sound separates Whidbey Island from the mainland to the south. While this barrier limits growth, it also helps to maintain the character and beauty of the island. Furthermore, it provides a distinct catchment for our congregation. We are the only Unitarian-Universalist congregation serving Whidbey Island—the longest continuous island in the continental U.S.

An island community faces unique challenges in attracting visitors and transitioning those visitors into friends and members. Islanders are, by nature, independent, reclusive, and tend not to be joiners. Fortunately, UUCWI offers a faith community that celebrates independence, encourages involvement, and welcomes newcomers.

We are relatively effective at attracting people to our services. Nearly every service includes visitors and newcomers to the island. We average one to two new visitors per service. About half of these visitors have a background in Unitarian Universalism; the other half are new to our faith. Many have sought us out because they have young families and are seeking for their children a religious education that is liberal and free of constrictive dogma. Our growth relies on attracting these potential members, reaching out to relocating Unitarian Universalists, and extending a warm welcome to visitors who may be unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism but share our values and vision. We rely upon the talent, initiative and resourcefulness of our Membership Committee for success in this outreach.

## *The Challenges of Attracting Visitors Today*

- Our space is rented, does not look particularly “UU,” and is identified as a Lutheran church except for a few hours on Sunday afternoon.
- In our current rental agreement, services may only be held at 4:00 p.m. on Sundays. This has cost us some members, especially those with young families. The building program directly addresses this factor.
- Our members are not uniformly confident about their ability to represent their religion to others, or to invite their friends and neighbors to Church.
- Our budget for advertising is limited, of necessity, and precludes most kinds of “paid” advertising.
- Unitarian Universalism doesn’t have top-of-mind name recognition, and most people don’t know what it represents.

## *Next Steps For Attracting Visitors*

In the earliest years of this plan, we intend to:

- Teach our members, through this plan and in other ways, the importance of their being missionaries for Unitarian Universalism. We know that there is no more effective way to attract members than for our congregants to initiate personal invitations to visit our church.
- Support the work underway by the Director of Religious Education
- Continue an active social action program. We have found that putting our values into practice helps to show who we are, generates publicity, and attracts like-minded persons.

- Plan worship services that encourage our members to bring friends and relatives and tailor these services to elucidate Unitarian Universalist ideals and principles.
- Tune all of our communication to emphasize the attributes of UUCWI and Unitarian Universalism that are most important to our target demographic including:
  - The engagement in an open-minded exploration of varied spiritual perspectives.
  - Educational offerings designed to foster moral and ethical values in our children.
  - Support in one's spiritual journey and our individual search for meaning.
  - A warm welcome into a friendly, informal church community.
  - Support in times of need through our Caring Connections Committee and Chaplain services.
- Continue to emphasize and enhance our web site.
- Continue to have our services listed in appropriate periodicals.
- Look for activities, milestones, and services worthy of press releases. Cultivate a relationship with the sympathetic local journalism community.
- Continue to operate booths at local community events such as fairs

### *Long-term Plans for Attracting Visitors*

In later years of this plan, we intend to:

- Better understand which of our activities are most effective and adjust our plans. Utilize and test classic marketing, particularly direct mail.
- Identify and sponsor public forums on issues that will be important to the UU demographic.

- Use our new facility in ways that will support and attract our community.
- Join with others in the wider organization to more successfully “brand” Unitarian Universalism, so that it approaches the level of identification that other major religions enjoy in the public consciousness.

## *Outreach Through Ministry*

During the nearly four years that UUCWI has worked with our one-third-time minister, the Rev. Elizabeth "Kit" Ketcham, the congregation has experienced an increase in ministry services such as pastoral care, worship design, strengthened infrastructure, greater outreach into the community and social justice issues. Rev. Ketcham has supported congregational efforts in fundraising, has introduced the Welcoming Congregation curriculum to further UUCWI's outreach into the community, has encouraged the board and committees to clarify and strengthen their policies and procedures, has worked with the Worship committee to provide worship services of high quality and depth of meaning, has counseled our Religious Education and Caring Connections programs, and has offered the congregation opportunities for witness in the public square. During this period, worship and event attendance has increased and membership has grown. Kit has recently moved to Whidbey Island. Her presence here is enhancing our visibility in the community as she is a consummate networker and is personally involved in social service and social justice issues.

## *Outreach Through Religious Education*

In 2002, UUCWI conducted a congregational survey to determine where we should concentrate our energies. Survey after survey indicated that it was religious education

and exploration that drew our members to us. We came to realize that RE programs for both adults and children are vital to our growth initiatives. To that end, we have established an Adult RE program with offerings in both the North and South ends of the island. We enhanced our Children's RE program by adding a paid director and teacher and are further enhancing it by adding a new offering for younger children.

The completion of the new building will remove the primary inhibitor to the growth of our Children's RE offering: we will finally have services and RE on Sunday morning, which fits the activity schedule of young families. Religious Education will continue to be a priority for UUCWI and we intend to add to our program offerings and invite more of the community at large to participate.

## *Outreach Through Social, Economic, Environmental Justice*

Our Committee for Social Action continues to reach out to our community and the world. We intend to be a leader on Whidbey Island in this regard. We know we will not only attract like-minded activists to our banner, but we will serve our community and honor the principle that we are a part of an interconnected web of existence.

Here are just some of the areas in which our Social Action Committee has worked:

- Adoption of a stretch of Mutiny Bay Rd. for litter removal. UUCWI members have pitched in for the beautification of Whidbey Island.
- Worked to register and educate voters to prepare for elections. Created an educational guide for voters.
- Created a brochure to guide individuals in aligning their charitable giving with their goals and priorities
- Encouraged congregation members to participate in the Heifer Project

- Supported a congregation member's Peace Corp involvement in an indigenous community in southern Bolivia. UUCWI's Social Action committee sold handmade baskets from that community and donated the profits to scholarships for village members to attend a vocational school.

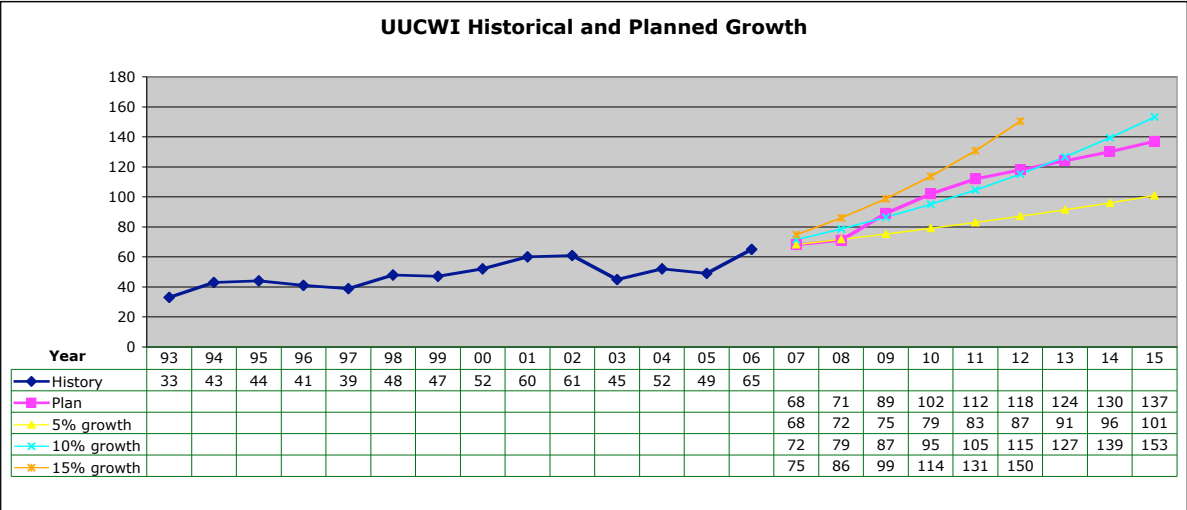
## *Outreach Through the Arts*

Our little congregation is blessed with an embarrassment of riches in artists, musicians, writers, and public speakers. We have exploited, and will continue to exploit this wealth to the fullest with concerts, art shows, sing-alongs, poetry readings, craft shows, and community forums. In the past, we have staged these events at the homes of members and friends. And, while their hospitality is greatly appreciated, we know how much more effective these endeavors will be when they occur in our Church home.

## *Outreach Through Extending Community*

Central to our growth initiative is the extension of our catchment area. While the congregation once catered primarily to South Whidbey communities, much of recent growth has come from the North end of the island, where the city of Oak Harbor is located. Our minister, Kit Ketcham, suggested that we engage in further outreach to this neglected community. Results so far have been promising. It is our goal to extend and enhance outreach to the North by offering more programs, classes, and events in the area; helping to coordinate transportation and carpooling to our facility; and by advertising, and communicating more extensively in the North end.

We have purchased a Ministry Area Profile and are using the data to target our efforts for maximum effect. Population densities and growth projections for Whidbey Island are well favored for our congregation to double over the next decade. While the lack of diversity of this population may pose a problem in attracting young families, we are confident that with the right facilities and programs we can attain significant and steady growth in all areas.



We forecast an increase in our growth rate for several years upon occupying our new home, moving worship services to Sunday mornings, and increasing our visibility and ability to be of service in our island community.

*Transición: Visitor, Friend, Member*

Our congregation is one that believes in welcoming newcomers. We endeavor to be friendly and inclusive, and are receptive to the gifts and contributions of visitors, friends, and new members. Our Minister is strongly attentive to welcoming, mentoring and assimilating our newcomers. Members who came to us initially as visitors report that a primary reason for their continued interest in UUCWI is that

they were greeted warmly and made to feel welcome and valued. We believe that we can do even better as a church in this regard, get to know people and their interests, assist them in assimilating into the community, include them and make sure they feel welcomed and valued, help them to feel comfortable, and inform and support them in the membership process should they decide to join us.

## Summary and Conclusions

We feel we are strongly situated to grow and prosper in this community. We are the only Unitarian Universalist congregation on Whidbey Island and are therefore not in competition with other UU churches for congregants. We have a strong core of established members, a dedicated and progressive leadership, a commitment to ministry, solid growth performance, a widening catchment zone, and a congregation committed to securing our future through growth and demonstration of our values and principles. Our Board, minister, committees, and program providers will strive to be assets and leaders in this community while at the same time encouraging involvement, accepting input, and welcoming new members.