

North Chapel

# Our Future in Focus

North Chapel Universalist Society  
Woodstock, VT

November 18, 2014

# Introduction

At its July 2014 meeting, the North Chapel Board of Trustees decided to invite the community into a process of reflection, discussion and collective problem solving with a focus on the church's future. Realizing that several years had passed since the last time the church had paused to take account, the board believed the time was right and ripe to harness our minds and hearts to this kind of assessment.

A Planning Committee stepped up to design and lead the process, with an aim to build on the church's previous strategic efforts, take a pulse on the community's current status, and bring a cohesive focus to the many powerful and profound energies that have enabled this church to thrive since its dedication in 1835.

When Daniel announced in September that he would leave his position as minister next June, the context for this planning work shifted. His news not only stirred many feelings, but also surfaced an acute awareness that the community is the deepest source of the church's continuity. It became even clearer that now is an auspicious moment to declare our values and priorities and to plan for and work toward a vibrant future. To do so, honors the North Chapel's legacy, expresses our enormous gratitude to Daniel, and equips us to meet challenges with love, strength, and intelligence.

# About this report

The Planning Committee presents this draft document to the board and community for review, comment, and ultimately, endorsement. Having heard from more than 80 people associated with the church and spent many hours in thoughtful conversation, the Committee believes that the key themes identified here represent a compelling and constructive set of priorities to guide the North Chapel's actions and use of resources in the next three to five years.

We look forward to working with the board and the community to refine these statements in preparation for the all-hands meeting on December 6, when we will use our collective talents to turn these important and noble aspirations into practical and useful options to pursue.

With respect and gratitude for the opportunity to serve,

*Barbara Bartlett, Brooke Beard, Peg Brightman, Christine Cimini, Rick Fiske, Susan Inui, Peggy Kannenstine, Denise Lyons, Anne Macksoud, Jack Nelson, Richard Schramm, Michael Stoner*

# Goals for planning

**The Planning Committee sought to create unifying themes that:**

1. Enable the church to continue to live into the fullest expression of its vision and mission, in light of current and anticipated needs and conditions.
2. Inspire the imagination of the church community and coalesces its energy toward a clear, collective purpose.
3. Guide the church's planning, choices, actions, and use of resources in the near-term (three to five years).

# Themes

<b>Celebrate</b>	<b>Broaden</b>	<b>Deepen</b>	<b>Commit</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our loving, caring, diverse community</li> <li>• Being a place to seek spiritual insight with freedom from judgment</li> <li>• Our rich offerings of music, poetry, reflection and beauty</li> <li>• Our role in initiating social change</li> <li>• DANIEL!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Actively, profoundly welcome everyone</li> <li>• Attract, engage and support families, children, and adolescents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage and support interaction across generations</li> <li>• Enable people to relate more deeply and authentically to themselves and to others</li> </ul>	<p><b>To a focused approach to social justice:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss the North Chapel's role in social justice activities</li> <li>• Support existing initiatives</li> <li>• Make responding to the climate crisis our key priority</li> </ul>
<p><b>Organize</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support effective, inclusive, democratic and transparent lay leadership and decision-making.</li> <li>• Stay focused on priorities, while being responsive, flexible and nimble.</li> <li>• Carry out the community's work in a way that allows people to thrive, without overburdening a few.</li> <li>• Practice skillful engagement with matters involving change, so that new possibilities can be aired, vetted, and considered without polarization.</li> <li>• Create longer-term plans for buildings and infrastructure to reflect community needs.</li> <li>• Expand financial resources through effective internal and external fund raising, to provide reasonable stability and sufficient funding to achieve community priorities.</li> </ul>			

# Celebrate

## **We have much to celebrate now about the North Chapel:**

- **Our loving, caring and diverse community**

With a “strong sense of belonging” and “connection,” a place of “listening and sharing” and “mutual support,” “where I know someone has my back,” where we can “be ourselves,” “be vulnerable,” feel part of a “family” especially for those who “do not have family here,” and am “around people who do different things,” a “place for disenfranchised and disaffected.”

- **Being a place to seek spiritual insight and wisdom, with freedom from judgment**

A “place of open spiritual inquiry,” “inspiration,” an “everything is okay church,” “agenda-less place,” a “center for spiritual life,” with a “live and let live attitude,” “where everyone is free to believe as they wish,” “don’t need robe, to be special,” where we can “seek authenticity,” “accept ourselves,” “hear new ideas,” “think about things that had not thought about before,” “be agitated,” “be wholly ourselves,” “learn more about ourselves,” “keep growing,” “be our best selves.”

- **Our rich offerings of music, poetry, reflection, contemplation, and beauty**

With “inspiring Sunday services,” in a space that is “beautiful” and “contemplative,” with lovely “music and a choir,” “touching joys and concerns,” “poetry that is transcendent,” that helps “me feel nourished spiritually,” and reflections where we are “asked to interpret meaning on our own.”

# . . . Celebrate

- **Our role in making positive change in our local community and beyond**

We nurture and support individuals and groups engaged in positive social and environmental change (Sustainable Woodstock, Woodstock Affordable Housing, Change the World Kids, Food Shelf, Life and Hope, and more). “Our church does incredible things in the community,” “Our unique contribution is entrepreneurship, engendering programs,” “an engine for social action in the community,” “community initiatives are a BIG part of the North Chapel’s contribution.”

- **DANIEL!**

“He has nurtured a deep sense of caring simply by being who he is,” “met my needs in so many ways,” “what Daniel is doing is what we want people to do,” “Daniel has an interest in the world, has a spiritual practice, has an interest in people,” “has managed to make the church work wonderfully well with a very wide range of philosophical viewpoints,” “is a huge reason why the church and its community are the way they are.... his role as a thinker and leader has enabled the community to grow,” “Daniel has given me so much and helped me feel supported.”

# Broaden

## **However, we need to broaden our reach:**

Some people felt that “we don’t greet people well enough,” we “can really look cliquey to new people,” “joys and concerns can make outsiders feel estranged,” “not much room for the ‘working man’,” “we could do better with differences,” “our most significant challenge . . . is embracing differences,” “often too politically correct,” and “people leave the church because they do not feel included.” Many others felt that we needed to become more welcoming.

- **We need to actively, profoundly welcome everyone**

Become a more welcoming and diverse place. Provide a big tent and an open door. Invite curiosity and inquiry without judgment. Be a place where anyone can join a conversation, jump in and connect in simple ways. Be more “open and welcoming,” “reaching out,” “a place of meeting” where we “make everyone feel welcome, all sorts of people,” “look for outsiders to hug,” “more expansive to those who are more conservative,” “no ‘Us’ and ‘Them,’” “no place of judgment,” a “place where community is created and connections deepened,” “easier access for families,” “more support for singles,” “include people seeking ‘religious experience’,” “see those without friends there and bring them in,” and be “a church that is a refuge.”

- **We need to serve as a sanctuary**

As part of our welcoming community, we’ll offer safety, unwavering and unqualified acceptance, and care to those in need who are a part of this community and those who find their way to it. Be a place where people find love, where people can be vulnerable.



# . . . Broaden

- **We need to attract, engage and support families, children, and adolescents**

Many respondents feel a deep need to attract families, children, and adolescents. “My personal needs are met in Sunday service but church doesn’t meet need of my family,” “we need more children involved!,” “I don’t see adolescents,” “it’s unfortunate that we can’t attract more young people.” “Evolve as a younger place, fewer gray heads,” “reach out to young families,” greater “honoring of children,” “become a meeting place for teenagers,” “focus on community’s children of all ages,” and provide a “space where the young, middle aged and old feel compelled to go.”

# Deepen

**Many people expressed a longing for deeper interpersonal connections and other kinds of spiritual experiences:**

- **We need to encourage and support interaction across generations**

Create warm connections that nourish all. A sense of family for children and elders. Have a “parents group” as well as Elders Circle, “provide ‘adopted’ grandparents for children who need them” (and ‘adoptive’ grandchildren for elders who need them), and have “adults engage more with children in services, circle dinners, perhaps joys and concerns.”

- **We need to enable people to relate more deeply and authentically to themselves and to others through spiritual education and practices, small group discussions, and meditative and other contemplative practices.**

“Love comes from deeper understanding,” “we need “more depth, intensity, searching, transformation,” “more venues like covenant groups,” “more regular activities that reach others,” “small group activities,” “Joy and Lawrence-type workshops,” “restoration of adult RE and study groups,” “yoga, body-centered therapy,” “more and better space for calm reflection,” and “opportunities for silent meditation and for quiet and pause.”

# Commit

**People in the church community express a range of views on how we should relate to the larger community and to social and environmental concerns:**

- Some believe that it's challenge enough to meet the needs of those within our congregation: "Charity begins at home," "overextended; problem taking care of everyone," "focus has to be on our own congregations," "serve people who are here."
- Others want the church to reach beyond its walls: "We need to engage in communities with our liberal religious values," "take the lead in promoting social, economic and environmental justice in the community," "create a culture of engagement and excitement to be involved," "name our service to the community beyond our immediate congregation as part of our overall mission," "need to become "a leader in our town, working on new economy, climate crisis," "extend loving community beyond church walls" and realize that "faith is not theoretical – it's how you are in the world."
- And another group finds a middle path, emphasizing the need to support those who choose to be more socially and environmentally active in the world: "social justice requires a person, a leader," we need to "balance reaching out with congregation needs," "focus on our own needs including the needs of some to help others," and "provide a base for the work of individuals."

# . . . Commit

To proceed,

- **We need to foster a robust discussion about the appropriate role for the North Chapel community in social justice initiatives, enabling us to build mutual understanding of these perspectives**
- **We need to support our current, ongoing social justice initiatives while this conversation proceeds**
- **Furthermore, the planning committee recommends that the board acknowledge the climate crisis as a key priority for the North Chapel and engage our community in developing a plan for how the church can respond over the next three to five years**

This will allow us to take a more focused approach to our current social and environmental work in the community, responding to those who want the church to “participate in social action in a more coordinated way,” “be more focused in what we try to tackle,” and “make a long-term commitment to one issue.”

# . . . Commit

## **Here's why responding to the climate crisis should be the key focus for our social justice agenda:**

- The causes of climate change have spiritual roots and its effects have profound implications for the Seventh Principle we covenant to affirm and promote: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.*
- The Unitarian Church has a long tradition of taking a stand on critical social issues. The climate crisis is considered the issue of our day, encompassing matters of environmental protection, food security, social and economic inequality, and security, as documented in multiple studies including recent reports from the Department of Defense and the United Nations.
- In the 2013 social justice priority survey, environmental justice was among the top three in importance (64%), tied for first for an area of increased education at the North Chapel (48%), ranked second for current involvement (29%) and first for area where people would like to get more involved (51%).
- The North Chapel made a commitment in 2007 to be a Green Sanctuary. It is time to assess what being “green” means in 2014.
- We have a successful track record of leadership in this domain. Sustainable Woodstock grew out of a church initiative and the newly organized Climate Marchers and Beyond group is sustained by our support.
- With this focus, the church can integrate education and service projects on the climate crisis into its ongoing activities.

# Organize

**And, finally, we need to organize better and educate ourselves more fully to pursue these themes effectively:**

- Support effective, inclusive, democratic, and transparent lay leadership.
- Stay focused on priorities, while being responsive, flexible and nimble.
- Carry out the work of the community in a way that allows people to thrive, without overburdening a few.
- Practice skillful engagement with matters involving change, so that new possibilities can be aired, vetted, and considered without polarization.
- Create longer-term plans for buildings and infrastructure to reflect community needs.
- Expand financial resources through effective internal and external fund raising, to provide reasonable stability and sufficient funding to achieve community priorities.

# Action Planning

some ideas to consider on December 6

# Introduction

We heard many good, tactical ideas that might be options to pursue. These possibilities can seed the conversations that will happen on December 6, when the community will evaluate the merits of these ideas, generate some additional ones, and consider what steps might be taken over the next several years to realize collective aspirations. These ideas are organized by topic, but not prioritized in any way.



# Celebrating Daniel and preparing for his departure

- Learn from Daniel all the things he does on a daily and weekly basis and keep of record of these, so that we can figure out ways to continue doing those things that are important to the church.
- Learn more about how he relates to young people in the community, and explore ways for those relationships to continue, even without him.
- Learn what people loved about Daniel—and what about him spoke to them.
- Meet in small and large groups on a regular or ongoing basis, to share thoughts about losing Daniel, sharing our joy, our memories and our grief, and giving voice to our worries.
- Prepare a book of our favorite memories of Daniel, including comments, photographs, illustrations, favorite sermons. Make it available for anyone to add to at any time.

# Actively, profoundly welcoming all and serving as a sanctuary

- Create a Care Bank where folks with continuing needs can request help without having to always keep asking the same individuals. It can feel embarrassing and like an imposition to keep on asking for help from a particular person.
- Develop a fund to care for aging people in need.
- Hold a twice-yearly “Committee Fair” during coffee hours: each committee will set up a table, with photos, a list of current members, and other information that communicates the mission of the committee, its current activities, and a sign-up list to request more information. This gives the newcomers as well as long-time members ways to getting to know what is going on in the church.
- Newcomers: how can we actively welcome them, and make them feel comfortable? Greeters could invite them to coffee hour after church, and/or introduce them to others whom they might like to meet.
- Pastoral Care: how can we do a better job? How do other churches organize this? Can we invite (and keep a list of) donations of special services—like meal preparation, reading to someone, rides to the doctor, etc.

# Attracting, engaging and supporting families, children, and adolescents

- Consider funding a full-time RE director or an assistant minister who could focus on youth.
- RE Committee should include parents and others who are interested.
- More creative, less-structured RE programs that are gender- or age-appropriate.
- Develop a fund for youth programs.
- Engage children more fully in services on a regular basis.
- Invite the CTWK to do a service.
- Provide child care for all evening or week-end adult meetings and events, so that adults with young families feel valued and are able to attend (including for Evensong, small group meetings, musical events at the North Chapel, etc.).

# . . . Attracting, engaging and supporting families, children, and adolescents

- Provide meals for all evening events (or mid-day weekend events) so that families with young children can attend without the extra burden of preparing a rushed meal at home. Include Circle Dinners, including a Circle Dinner for the kids.
- Provide religious education for children and teens, including those between the ages of 10 and 13, who are often underserved.
- Partner with the Waldorf School (or other schools).
- Have a parents group, just like the elders group.

# Enabling people to relate more deeply and authentically to themselves and to others

- More venues like Covenant Groups.
- Have small groups and workshops like the ones Joy and Lawrence offered.
- More opportunities for group interactions and connections, to share experiences and insights
- RE Committee in future should include adult RE, with planning by interested and experienced volunteers.
- Develop more consistent and coordinated set of activities beyond Sunday service.
- Consider small group discussion after Sunday service, in parallel with coffee hour for those who are more introverted.
- More and better space for calm reflection.
- Opportunities for silent meditation and for quiet and pause.

# Encouraging and supporting interaction across generations

- Provide opportunities for adults to engage more with children, e.g. in services and at circle dinners.
- Find a way to include children in joys and concerns occasionally.
- Consider the idea of “adoptive” grandparents or grandchildren.

# Supporting, strengthening and focusing our current work in the community

- Clarify and record all on-going work in the community, including collaborations with other organizations.
- Ask the Social Justice Committee to share with the church a list of activities over the past five years and proposals for how these activities might evolve, change, or increase in future.

# Making climate change our number one priority

- Clarify the foundational work that was done for the church to be a Green Sanctuary.
- Have children's programs geared to climate change efforts, where they learn gardening or other skills or do community service.
- Educate, advocate, and demonstrate through our action and examples.



# Organize: strengthening our leadership

- Strengthen lay leadership.
- Create mechanisms for fully vetted discussion of issues of change.
- Learn more about the board.
- Help the board become more visionary.
- Be more open and transparent in all that we do.
- Examine our current processes and procedures, to make sure they are as democratic and inclusive as possible. (Example: Does a slate of nominees shut down other members of the congregation who might like to serve, but don't feel “invited” to serve?)
- Develop a “blue print” for the North Chapel going forward.

# ... Strengthening our leadership

- Better training for people who assume roles as leaders.
- Any time you set up a group, you need training for those who will lead it.
- Look carefully at our own self-governance process and assess to what extent it is truly democratic. Hire consultants from the outside to offer training in governance and leadership. I recommend Larry Lemmel on consensual democratic process.
- Pick fewer things/issues and focus resources of time, money and energy.
- Need frameworks for expressing agreements and disagreements, a forum for community concerns, a process to resolve concerns.
- Rotate members of committees off and new members on.

# Organize: strengthening our infrastructure

- Renovate the barn for small groups or CTWK.
- Create a quiet, private space for small groups and meditation within the church.
- Provide more parking.
- Use space more fully and effectively.
- Give the building to a historical society with the option of using it, so that we can pay rent and not be responsible for upkeep. See the congregation as a movement that can exist without these walls and even be free of them. Join forces with Shir Shalom and share buildings.

# Organize: strengthening our finances

- Link outside financing to our social action work.
- Don't be afraid to “sell” our “product”—to solidify finances.
- Seek funding from external sources, not just church members.

# Appendix

The Planning Committee's Process,  
August–November 2014

# The process

The committee began meeting in late August to frame its conceptual challenge and to establish tasks for taking a pulse on the church community's sense of itself today and its priorities for tomorrow. To communicate with the community about its work and to invite broad participation, committee members spoke at several Sunday services, posted weekly announcements via *In Touch*, and wrote updates for *The Quest*.

The committee conducted focus groups with existing church committees and other groups; held four open sessions to which all were invited; and organized special conversations with parents of young children and with several members of the Change the World Kids. In addition, committee members made themselves available for individual conversations. Most of the data gathering happened in one-on-one or group conversations; however, several people chose to express their thoughts in writing.

Although not everyone in the church community was able to provide input, a good sampling of people did. From late September to early November, eighty-one people associated with and interested in the North Chapel provided feedback in one form or another.

# . . . The process

People of varying ages participated. Fifty-seven are women/girls and twenty-four are men:

- 4 adolescent girls
- 15 adults in their 30s-40s
- 7 adults in their 50s
- 56 adults in their 60s-70s

Although the committee didn't collect precise information on everyone's length of association with the church, the range of experience is from less than a year to nearly lifetime involvement. A typical respondent has been coming to the North Chapel for about seven years.

To provide a context for its work, the committee consulted studies conducted by previous strategic groups within the church. Committee members reviewed a 2008 Growth Committee report, including its Seven Pillars for Growth, and a 2010 community-wide survey to which 101 people had responded.

With this information in hand, several members of the planning committee synthesized the material to reach tentative conclusions about key themes and to draft a preliminary report for review by the larger committee. The full committee met on November 3 and 15 to discuss and refine the sub-group's findings and to approve this report to be presented to the board.