



**Wildflower Church: A Unitarian
Universalist Congregation**

**Membership Development Plan
2010-2012**

Draft

INTRODUCTION

The goal of the Membership Development Plan (MDP) is to support and implement Wildflower Church's mission, vision, and strategic plan.

Church's Mission

Wildflower Church is a deliberately inclusive, open-minded religious community in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. We joyfully nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys, and we commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice.

MEMBERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The strategies in the MDP are designed to attract visitors, to welcome newcomers into membership, and to meet the ongoing needs of members for nurture, spiritual growth, and a sense of belonging. Successful implementation of the plan requires church-wide intentionality and commitment to growth. It relies on the leadership, creativity and resources of the Board of Trustees, the minister, the Director of Religious Education, and all committees, in particular communications, worship, religious education, adult programming, facilities, and membership. ***Ultimately, attracting, integrating, and retaining members relies on the strength and vitality of the entire church.***

MEMBERSHIP GROWTH GOALS

Wildflower Church is committed to growth, both in the number and diversity of members and in their spiritual development and connections with one another. We recognize the positive effect the church has had on our own lives and we want to continue opening our doors, our faith and our hearts to others.

In August, 2007, the congregation called its first full-time minister. From January, 2008 to mid-August, 2009, membership grew by about 39%, from 121 to 168 people. The church's growth projections anticipate the church will have 275 members by December, 2012. At that time, the church will develop a process for congregation-wide discussions about the benefits and challenges of continued growth. Until then, church leaders are reluctant to predict a "final" size for the church because doing so may limit our dreams.

MEMBERSHIP INITIATIVES

We have defined three core competencies we must develop, maintain, and continuously improve to fulfill our goals. The competencies may be roughly sequential along the path to membership but they share much, overlap substantially, and are interrelated.

1. Attract visitors
2. Welcome newcomers into membership
3. Meet members' ongoing need for nurture, spiritual growth, and sense of belonging

One: Attracting Visitors

Successful outreach depends on the talent, initiative and resourcefulness of the Communications Committee, supported by other committees, the Board, the Minister, and the Director of Religious Education. Our outreach efforts need to attract not only people familiar with UU but also seekers

who are un-churched and those who have attended other churches but are unfamiliar with Unitarian Universalism.

People usually decide to visit a church because a friend invites them or because the church's public messages attract them. Visitors make their initial decisions about a church within the first few minutes of their arrival, based on ease of finding the church, the appearance of the parking lot and the front entrance, and, most importantly, the warmth and friendliness of the first people they encounter. Their decisions then depend on the quality of the sermon, the music, the religious education programs, and the appearance of the classrooms and the bathrooms.

Wildflower Church is relatively effective at attracting visitors, averaging about four new visitors per service.

Attracting Visitors Today

We use the following strategies to attract visitors:

- An attractive, frequently updated website (the most effective strategy)
- Invitations to friends to visit the church
- A listing in the yellow pages
- A sign outside the church on Sunday mornings
- Displaying the church banner in marches and rallies

Challenges of Attracting Visitors Today

- We rent space in a senior center that does not look "church-like"
- Our rented space is identified as Wildflower Church for just a few hours on Sunday mornings
- Our members are not uniformly confident about their ability to explain Unitarian Universalism in a concise, engaging way
- Our members are not uniformly comfortable with the thought of "spreading the good news" about the church
- Our publicity budget is limited, which precludes most kinds of paid advertising
- Most people do not know about Unitarian Universalism or what it represents

Next Steps for Attracting Visitors

- Emphasize the qualities of Wildflower Church likely to be most meaningful to people searching for a church:
 - Developing a spiritually-centered sense of meaning and purpose in life
 - Teaching children moral and ethical values
 - Participating in an open minded and friendly religious community
 - Involvement in social justice to make a positive difference in the lives of others
 - Participation in small groups to form closer connections with other people
- Continue to enhance our web site, purchase a listing in the yellow pages, Purchase an ad in south Austin community newspapers, like the Oak Hill Gazette
- Initiate a blog and develop other electronic communication methods to attract younger adults
- Continue displaying the church banner in marches and rallies
- Encourage members to place a church bumper sticker on their cars
- Cultivate relationships with local sympathetic journalists and send them press releases about noteworthy activities, milestones, and services worthy of press releases.
- Encourage members to become "missionaries" for Wildflower Church because the most effective strategy for attracting visitors is a personal invitation to attend church
- Encourage congregants to distribute the UUA wallet card, "We the member congregations," or something similar

Long-Term Strategies for Attracting Visitors

- Determine which strategies are most effective and revise them accordingly
- Staff booths at Austin-wide events such as the Gay Pride Festival and at community events in south Austin
- Utilize and test classic marketing, particularly direct mail to targeted zip codes
- Identify and sponsor public forums on issues of importance to the local church community
- Coordinate with other local UU congregations to more successfully “brand” Unitarian Universalism
- Ensure our future “home of our own” attracts and welcomes visitors (e.g., purchase a building in a visible location, purchase the largest street signage we can afford, construct a “wayside pulpit” with provocative messages, reserve parking spaces for visitors and handicapped close to the entrance, provide an easily recognizable front entrance with a covered portico so physically challenged people are protected from wind and rain when they enter the church, and provide a warm, welcoming front entrance hall, etc.)
- Identify community-wide needs and develop initiatives that both meet those needs and support the church’s mission

Two: Welcome Newcomers into Membership

Our first job as a congregation is to establish relationships with newcomers and provide avenues for them to learn more about the church so their decision to join is informed and will endure. Our second job is to welcome newcomers into membership and then make room for them and their ideas and suggestions for new ways of doing things.

We signal our church’s mission, our commitment to the Unitarian Universalist tradition, and our hopes for the future by clarifying what membership means and what is expected.

Welcoming Newcomers into Membership Today

- Our congregation is noted for its friendliness. Visitors and newcomers report they are greeted warmly and made to feel welcome and valued
- Greeters stand outside and warmly welcome people as they arrive, and steer visitors to the Visitor Table, where they receive a warm welcome, a name tag, a Visitors Packet, and several forms to complete
- The lay leader extends a special welcome to visitors, invites them to stay for fellowship after the service, displays an Intent-to-Join card, invites everyone who’s ready to join the church to complete the card, and avoids jargon, acronyms, and “in jokes” during the worship service
- The Minister tries to personally greet each visitor on the Sundays she is in the pulpit
- Everyone who signs an Intent-to-Join card receives an invitation to attend the next orientation
- We have an established path to membership that includes attendance at an orientation, clarity about the expectations of membership, a formal book-signing procedure, and an invitation to participate in a quarterly New Member Recognition Ceremony held during the worship service
- We offer varied classes and small-group ministries for newcomers and members that focus on religious and spiritual development and making connections with one another
- We offer high quality child care and religious education for children pre-school through elementary and programming for children in middle and high school

The Challenges of Welcoming Newcomers into Membership

- We need a more effective system for tracking and following up on visitors and newcomers
- Many congregants are reluctant to serve as warm, knowledgeable, intentional greeters if they are not “official greeters” on a designated Sunday

- Some newcomers are unable to attend a required quarterly orientation class
- Our facilities are crowded, with bottle necks in lobby and lack of space, especially for fellowship after the worship service, classes, and small groups.

Next Steps for Welcoming Newcomers into Membership

- Ensure all church-sponsored programs are handicapped accessible
- Develop a congregation-wide attitude of warm, open curiosity about newcomers so they feel welcomed as individuals
- Develop a process for evaluating the church's strategies to welcome newcomers into membership
- Develop a process for coordinating requests to newcomers to participate in the work of the church so they feel welcome but not overwhelmed by requests to work
- Develop an intentional, effective church-wide process for inviting visitors and newcomers to church-sponsored social events, classes, and social justice projects
- Evaluate the effectiveness of church-wide communications including preferred methods for receiving church news

Long-Term Strategies for Welcoming Newcomers into Membership

- Host newcomer lunches and other social events in our own facility so newcomers and others can make deeper connections with one another
- Continue assessing our progress and adjusting our strategies as needed.
- Investigate the effectiveness of assigning mentors to newcomers or assigning newcomers to a Caring Circle
- Consider launching a "UU Identity Month" during which the minister and the DRE offer services, written material, and other strategies to educate members to articulate our faith to others
- Provide simultaneous translation into Spanish during worship services and other church programs

Three: Sustain and Nurture Members

Few challenges are more complex than nurturing a growing, diverse congregation. The programs the church would like to offer to its members and the larger community will always exceed the resources available to support them, meaning the congregation will need to identify its top priorities and then carefully focus its "people" and financial resources on achieving them.

As we open our hearts and our church to more people, our challenges will include: 1) developing church-wide strategies to sustain and nurture hundreds of members during their life-long relationship with the church; 2) more effectively integrating newcomers and members into the life of the church; 3) welcoming new ideas, new ways of doing things, and new leadership; 4) effectively training, coaching, celebrating, and, when necessary, redirecting talent; 5) effectively cycling leadership; 6) strongly encouraging leaders to rest and refresh themselves when needed and then supporting them when they do so.

Because unresolved differences between individuals are among the most common reasons members leave a church that otherwise satisfies most of their needs for meaning and community, the church is in the process of developing a Covenant of Right Relations to guide congregants in their interactions with one another.

Sustaining and Nurturing Members Today

- We receive positive feedback about our church's openness and willingness to embrace newcomers in positions of leadership
- The minister's sermons satisfy the congregation's desire for intellectual stimulation and, just as important, they often satisfy the congregation's desire for more spiritual and participatory worship services that support our mission to "joyfully nurture our lifelong spiritual journeys"
- We offer many types of programs for adults, including classes and small group ministries, such as covenant groups and affinity groups
- We offer well-organized childcare and religious education classes for children from pre-kindergarten through elementary school
- We offer the Coming of Age program for youth in grades 8 through 12
- The website, weekly email announcements, and announcements from the pulpit inform congregants about church-sponsored activities
- The Caring Committee organizes practical assistance for members in need, for example meals, transportation to doctors' offices, and home visits
- The church offers periodic leadership training events
- The Religious Education Director and several congregants attended a conference on developing a youth program and are excited about the possibilities
- Annual Women's Retreat in the fall and family campout in the spring

Challenges of Sustaining and Nurturing Members Today

- Identifying the congregation's top priorities, developing goals and effective strategies for achieving them, and then focusing the congregation's energy and resources on implementing them so the church isn't "spread too thin"
- Congregants who teach children's religious education classes are unable to attend the Sunday worship service
- The church's "desperate" need for volunteers can result in congregants asking newcomers and new members to join committees and start "working" before they are fully integrated into the life of the church, which can result in newcomers feeling overwhelmed by the church's needs
- The church's need for additional leadership can result in asking established members to take on more and more responsibility, which can lead to burnout
- Lack of adequate administrative and professional staff, especially office staff and a youth director
- Developing a compelling religious education program for youth in middle and high school without a paid Youth Director to provide professional leadership
- Lack of a "home of our own" where we can provide a nursery for infants, individualized religious education classrooms, evening and weekday programs, social events, and church-sponsored community events and social justice projects

Next Steps in Sustaining and Nurturing Members

- Sustain and nurture our church culture of liveliness, warmth, laughter, and joy in the worship service and throughout church life
- Hire a part-time Youth Director to provide professional leadership for youth programs
- Develop a church-wide Covenant of Right Relations
- Develop a willingness to say "no" to new initiatives for which we lack joyful, eager, committed volunteers to lead them
- Develop a willingness to say "no" to continuing programs when we no longer have joyful, committed volunteers to lead them

- Continue to expand our small-group ministry to members
- Develop an effective church-wide system for identifying and contacting members who have not attended church recently
- Continue to evaluate the church's programming
- Expand fellowship opportunities with after-church potlucks, family picnics, and other events to nurture connections

Long-term Strategies for Sustaining and Nurturing Members

- Move into a "home of our own" and use the facility to support our mission
- Work with an architect to ensure our new facility has a warm, welcoming entrance hall, is free of bottlenecks, has enough restrooms, and has enough space for fellowship after the worship service, classes, small groups, etc.
- Develop and evaluate a system to sustain and nurture our members' continued commitment to the church and their engagement in church life
- Develop and maintain effective strategies for operating as a program church
- Develop and evaluate a system for welcoming members into small neighborhood-centered groups that deepen their connections with one another

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

With an energetic, skilled, and committed, full-time minister and plans to purchase a home of our own in the near future, Wildflower Church is poised to grow and thrive. The congregation is passionate about our church's mission and committed to living it both as a church and as individuals. Austin continues to attract the most common UU demographic, "professional/creatives," as well as a large and growing minority/immigrant population. Our church's challenge is to expand its mission to all who seek spiritual growth and nurture, an opportunity to raise families with timeless values, and support social justice.

Notes:

1. This plan was first developed by the Membership Committee, reviewed and revised by the chairs of key committees, and then reviewed, revised, and endorsed by the Board of Trustees.
2. This plan is based on the Membership Development Plan prepared by Sterling Unitarian Universalist Church.