

VISION TEAM

Team members: Chair, Charles Eastham, Members: Ruth Bonfiglio, Nancy Haley, Amanda Owings, Tom Rocklin, Dick Siefers (since Aug 2001), Virginia Stampler, Gordon Strayer (since January, 2002), Peter Thorne, Mike Van Meter, Doug Wallace (since January, 2002), Claire Whiteman (until Aug 2001), and Deb Schoeleman *ex officio* (until Aug 2001)

Consultant: Martha Easter-Wells, Congregational Fundraising Consultant, Unitarian Universalist Association

The Vision team was assembled 18 months ago and has been meeting twice monthly since August, 2000. Our charge was to lead the congregation in a planning process to consider options for growth, programming and building expansion. We established a process to develop options for meeting our long-term facility needs consistent with the goals of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Iowa City. We committed ourselves to carrying out a process to achieve an overwhelming consensus on which option to pursue.

The first phase of our work saw us meeting with fundraising consultant, Martha Easter-Wells from the Unitarian Universalist Association, meeting with all the UUSIC standing committees, and holding congregational meetings and forums. This effort led to an extensive dialog on what are our programmatic needs and what limitations exist to pursuing our goals as articulated in the Decisions for Growth planning effort. The Vision team studied the expansion and fundraising process followed by other UU congregations around the country. The team sought information from other congregations in Iowa City that had renovated or moved and met with the minister from First Christian Church to discuss their process that led to building on a new site.

Information obtained from all those consultations led to the creation of a matrix of needs for staff, space, programs and facilities. This large format matrix was posted on the wall of Channing Hall and members of the congregation were invited to add to it or comment on it.

The Vision team developed four options for the Society to consider:

- Remain at our current location and make only minor renovations to our present facilities.
- Remain at our current location but make major renovations or additions to our facilities.
- Purchase and move to another building and make renovations as necessary.
- Buy land and build a new building, in phases if necessary.

At this time, we also had discussions with the City of Iowa City to investigate possibilities of expanding our boundaries at our current location. From this we learned that the city would not be willing to sell us additional land adjacent to our current lot unless we would agree to move a major sewer line at a cost of over \$1 million for 15 additional feet of land to the east. We also learned that the city would be interested in our current building as a site for social service agencies or for demolition to create additional parking spaces. We contacted several area realtors to obtain information on the value and availability of downtown properties as well as land further out. This led to the finding that the purchase of one quarter block of a near downtown sub-prime property with older rental units would cost from \$350,000 to \$650,000 plus demolition costs. A new church building of 12,000 square feet might cost around \$1.5 million plus land costs. Extensive renovation could cost nearly as much depending on the scope of the project. In this context, we considered the challenges of financing and staging renovations or new construction while maintaining current operations. The Vision team recognized that to effectively finance such a project there has to be a high level of enthusiasm for the design and involvement in the process.

Aesthetics

Many have expressed opinions about improvements or changes that could be made to make our space more attractive, comfortable and inviting. Additional suggestions have centered on improvements to enhance our musical offerings and to allow other types of art performances in the sanctuary. Installation of increased audio/visual and internet capabilities would add another dimension to worship and RE. Outdoor green space has been mentioned often as highly desirable both as a view from within and for outdoor activities. Green space could provide an onsite outdoor play area for children and could provide a place for meditation and reflection. Some members of the congregation have expressed the desire to establish a memorial garden.

Parking

Parking is generally not identified as a problem by those who only attend the Sunday service. However, for staff and for those attending mid-week functions, it can be a problem. Some times of programming, especially that for seniors, has to be scheduled around the availability of parking. It is hoped that completion of the new ramp will alleviate some of these limitations.

Over the summer of 2001, members of the Vision Team gathered with 126 UUs at 16 separate Cottage Meetings. These meetings were held in the homes of congregation members and afforded the opportunity to engage in extended open discussions in a small group setting. Several themes emerged from these 16 meetings as highlighted below:

- People and the sense of community are more important than the building.
- Building and Society stewardship are important to ensure the future of a liberal religious community in Iowa City.
- The architectural quality of the sanctuary building is a source of great satisfaction and value to us and any decisions we make should reflect our commitment to the value of exemplary design.
- The significant state of disrepair of our buildings cannot be ignored.
- The energy inefficiency of our building is inconsistent with our values regarding environmental stewardship.
- The accessibility of our building to people of all abilities is important to live up to our value of welcoming all people.
- The demand for quality religious education programs has exceeded our capacity to support those programs. Many families are first attracted to UUSIC for the RE programs.
- Space for congregational gatherings and ceremonies is limiting. We could well utilize expanded community spaces for all congregation gatherings and for a growing interest in adult programs

Several Vision members walked through the church with an area contractor who specializes in renovation to consider deficiencies in the structural and mechanical elements of the Sanctuary and Worthley building. We were also interested in exploring what would be required to make our building completely accessible to people with disabilities. Subsequent to that, we solicited an opinion from a structural engineering firm on the feasibility of adding an additional floor to the Worthley Building. It was determined that we would not be able to add vertically to the structure. We also learned that the Sanctuary Building constructed in 1908 is structurally sound.

In May 2001 the Vision team disseminated the information obtained in the first 9 months of fact finding as a synthesis of the major themes. This included issues regarding space, accessibility, utilities, aesthetics, and parking as summarized below.

Space

Space limitations are problematic for virtually every program area. The sanctuary size and shape creates challenges for the worship service in terms of capacity and space for performances at the front of the sanctuary. Facilities for the child and adult religious education programs is limiting. Many child RE classes have regular attendance that exceeds the capacity of the rooms. With the growth of the Society, Channing Hall is no longer large enough for certain congregational functions. Suitable meeting places for committees and for music programs are limited and scheduling is difficult. An indoor recreational space for children would greatly facilitate a variety of children and youth activities.

Accessibility

Accessibility has been a priority for the congregation but remaining problems are not easily corrected. Current challenges are non-accessible restrooms, doors that can't be opened by the disabled, narrow hallways and doorways, labyrinthine routes required for access to people in wheel chairs, limited capacity of the elevator and chair lift, the lack of obvious routes of entrance and egress for the handicapped, and an inaccessible pulpit. As a welcoming congregation, we see these problems as in conflict with our principles.

Utilities

The utilities problems are those often encountered with 100-year old buildings. The plumbing and electrical systems are cobbled together and nearly unfixable, there is no insulation in the building and the windows in Worthley Building are terribly inefficient. The lack of dehumidification and air conditioning make it difficult to conduct worship services, weddings, memorials, or celebrations one third of the year. Leaking pipes and rain water discharges have caused the floor of Channing Hall to be plagued by wood rot. More restrooms and sinks are needed, especially in RE areas, and a kitchenette near the meeting rooms and classrooms would be helpful. There is a need for better diaper changing stations in restrooms. The church lacks a fire safety sprinkler system. Many people have expressed the feeling that our forebears saw to it that the church would be here for us and it is our duty to ensure that the next generation of Iowa City Unitarian Universalists will have a sound building in which to pursue truth and meaning.

- The sanctuary space is near the limits for Sunday services.
- Many people see value in continuing as a downtown church and wish to fully explore the possibilities of developing our current location to meet current and future needs.
- There is little enthusiasm for options 1 and 3 as listed above (1. Remain at our current location and make only minor renovations to our present facilities. —or— 3. Purchase and move to another building and make renovations as necessary.)

We are ready to consider concept plans and cost estimates for a major expansion at the current site (option 2) and at a new location (option 4).

This fall the Vision team informally consulted with several out-of-state architects and began the process of interviewing architectural firms as candidates for developing a pre-plan to present to the congregation. A pre-plan would include simple design plans and cost estimates with which to decide between options and to use for fundraising purposes. A preplan would include simple design plans and cost estimates with which to decide between options and to use for fund raising purposes. Selection of a firm for the pre-plan does not constitute selection for any later architectural services. After interviewing architects and checking their references, the Vision Team recommended to the Board that they enter into negotiations for a contract with Novak Design Group of Cedar Rapids, Iowa to prepare the preplan program.

On Sunday, April 14, and Wednesday, April 17, architects from the Novak Design Group presented the "preplan" they developed, after making both a comprehensive study of how our space is being used and a detailed examination of a variety of maintenance and program issues. They also provided cost estimates for both the renovation "preplan" and the alternative of developing entirely new equivalent space on another site. A proposal comparison and a preliminary estimate of project cost were distributed at those presentations. A total of over 100 members attended the architect presentations. The Vision Team hosted seven small group discussion meetings between those presentations and the Congregational meeting on May 19.

On April 18 the Team sent a letter to the Congregation with information about the choices which would be voted on by ballot at the May 19 Congregational meeting. Individual members of the team included statements reflecting their understanding of those choices.

Ruth Bonfiglio

"The question is: How much are we going to grow in the next few years, and how much do we want to invest in that growth? I vote for investing in a new building to carry our progress into the future."

Charlie Eastham

"Over the past 21 months we have examined in intimate detail the many ways the building we inhabit enhances the expression of our values as a liberal religious community and how that building can also fail to support those values. I have come to see that the accessibility to people of all abilities of the building we choose is an inescapable reflection of our value of welcoming all who come to our door.

A new building could be constructed on a single level with worship, classroom, community, and office space easily available to all regardless of how we move our bodies from place to place. Restrooms could be reached without need to resort to elevators and routes to all areas could be the same for everyone. Finally, and perhaps necessarily, the main entrance to the building through which most people enter for Sunday services would welcome everyone into our midst.

After closely reviewing the possibilities for renovation of our present building I have had to reluctantly conclude that it will be substantially less accessible than a new structure. I believe the main entrance for Sunday services as determined by appearance and use will continue to be the non-accessible northwest entrance. The proposed new accessible entrance on the west side will have no access from Gilbert Street and is the furthest entrance from any drop of parking. Inside the renovated building there are no restrooms on the Channing Hall level and moving by wheelchair from Channing Hall to the rest of the lower level requires using the elevator. Even the simple act of joining the congregation for fellowship after a service can only be done by using the elevator. Finally, if my child used a wheelchair I simply would not consider bringing her to religious education in this building even with the proposed renovations. There are too many other liberal churches with much more accessible space.

I believe the choice should be for a welcoming new home for all."

Tom Rocklin

"I like being in a building that has housed us for nearly 100 years. I know that a new building wouldn't mean losing our connection to the past, but it certainly would mean losing one of the physical manifestations of that connection.

I also like being downtown. That's partly because of what being downtown means for the society, but more because of what moving means for the community. We don't need more development on the edge of town and we don't need more of a parking lot downtown. I know that a decision to build is not, formally, a decision to leave downtown, but I suspect that the finances will drive us that way very strongly.

On the other hand, we will have to have a new building some day. No building keeps meeting its original occupants' needs forever. That day might have arrived.

In short, I just don't know."

Dick Siefers

I've many fond memories of the building at 10 S. Gilbert, most notably as the place that Vicki and I were married in 1982. I moved to Iowa City in 1981 and began attending Sunday services shortly thereafter. As one might suspect given my involvement in recent years, I have grown more and more attracted to the values and beliefs of UUSIC.

I've admired and respected the leadership role this Society has taken in the Iowa City community during its history. Many times the leadership role we have taken has involved considerable controversy including the Society's stance with respect to the anti-war movement of the late sixties and our welcoming of gays and lesbians in the mid-nineties. I see this Society continuing this tradition and thinking independently with its heart and mind. I believe the symbolism of our central location is an important ingredient of what we do and what we are about. I believe that one is better able to create change from within (near the heart of a community) than from the outside (on the outskirts of town).

As such, I've been torn by the direction that my heart tells me I should follow and what my mind says. Despite my fond memories of the building, I find that I'm not attracted to the structure as a whole. As I reflect on my 20 years in this building, I constantly find myself thinking about my first impression of 10 S. Gilbert. The structure itself did little to excite me. The exterior then, as it is now, contrasted an architecturally pleasant looking building with one that is fairly bland and non-descript. On the inside the dark interior of the Sanctuary, the lack of "warmth" of the Worthley Building, and the conditions of Channing Hall did little to change my impression. If it were not for the surety that my beliefs were in harmony with that of the Society, the building would have been a detriment to my participation and membership. Unfortunately, I believe we loose many potential members because of their first impression of our home.

Throughout most of the Vision process I have been hopeful that we could improve upon the conditions above while at the same time position the Society to have a home that would meet its needs for the next 50 years. Unfortunately, I do not believe either is possible given the limitations of the current site and costs to remodel. I like the appearance of the original 1912 building. If the Worthley Building could be feasibly torn down and replaced with a building that blended in to the architecture of the original building my view might be different. However, with the changes as they are, I have concerns that we will spend a lot of money for very little long term reward. Although we will have created additional seating capacity it may not be ideally suited for future growth. Space for the RE Program is also limited. Specifically the senior high group will not have a dedicated area that they can permanently call home. Sharing the stage with other groups lacks a certain stability that I believe seniors crave and need as their world changes quickly around them. Although a remodeled building will be an improvement over the existing structure with respect to handicapped accessibility, it will still have many limitations. From an environmental viewpoint we could do better both with respect to the efficiency of the space we can use and in the use of energy.

Because of these concerns and many others, I believe our best choice for the future of UUSIC is to explore the option of building a new home.

Virginia Stamler

After many discussions and much soul searching I have come to the conclusion we need a new building. I have put a great deal of time, energy and money into these buildings over the last 50 years and I know it is time to give up. The cost to re-arrange but not give us what we need or want is a waste. It is possible to like a new design as well as our present one. What is it some like? If it is the ambience, that can be

recreated in a new larger space. Remodeling what we have changes the feeling anyway. So I say let's go for another space and encourage people to think of new design ideas that would reflect their feelings, to keep an open mind, ready to grow and to encourage others to do the same. Who knows, some of the people in the more "fundamental" churches may begin to feel as we do and come to see and hear our progressive "less oppressive" ideas and stay. An "open" religious society has "open" minds in "open" space to accommodate growth in all areas. Finding land may be difficult but we can if we think of the future and are really open to ideas.

Gordon Strayer

One of my chief concerns is that we find the means, somehow, to upshift our thinking into a future mode, and try to put aside the quite natural tendency to think largely in terms of the here and now--to make decisions that yield a product essentially reflecting the Society as we know it today, with only a little touching-up here and there: to neaten up our bathrooms, perhaps, "warm up" the lighting in our Sanctuary at night, or improve our sound-system so those sitting in the back of the sanctuary can hear everything Nancy says from the pulpit, even when she necessarily turns her head to maintain eye contact with the entire congregation.

It's so easy to get stuck in here-and-now-with-minor-improvements! But it seems to me that we owe it to our oncoming generations to try to ask ourselves such questions as "Will that really meet the needs of Iowa City UUs 20 years from now?" Or, indeed, "Will this early 20th-century space prove sufficiently attractive that it will continue to draw long-time members and actually attract other Iowa Citizens of 2020...2030...2050?" When one thinks of the changes in our schools, our theaters, our auditoria, our libraries and other methods of presenting information, just in the 20-30 years that most of our senior members have been active here, it's hard to answer such questions with anything but "It seems very unlikely."

I suggest that these questions, or some very like them, must have been on the lips of those who made the decision in the early '60s to get our RE pupils out of those little clusters in Channing Hall and into a building specifically planned for educational purposes--and aren't we glad they had that foresight, for what it did to create a greatly improved learning environment for our own kids?

I suggest also that many of us might profit from visiting some churches built in the last 15 or so years, in order to see the difference between those churches located in generous-green settings in which their kids can come face to face with nature, and through whose large windows their congregants can seek both inspiration and relaxation, as compared to our own relatively small physical plant, environmentally unfriendly and resource-wasteful and anchored to a small lot surrounded by concrete, bricks, asphalt--and police cars. If our congregation should decide to think seriously about looking into an entirely new site and structure, I would suggest that we organize a few field trips to the Davenport and Des Moines UU churches, at least--one need go no farther than those cities to view buildings that are serving their existing congregations in inspiring settings, and will continue to serve those of at least the next couple generations.

For some of us, it is a natural reaction to feel, and say, in effect, "I really don't want us to grow. I like a church where I can know everyone" (although hardly any of us literally do know everyone), "and if we get another hundred or two hundred members, we'll have to go to two or more services, and I didn't like that when we tried it a few years ago." Frankly, that point of view seems to me to be essentially selfish--to say, in effect, "What's good enough for me should be good enough for my grandchildren and other kids of future generations. I like things just the way they are, and they should like them that way, too." How many of us would be satisfied, not to say blissfully happy, to attend churches essentially like those in which our grandparents worshipped? Given any choice at all, how many of us would be attracted to such settings? I certainly believe it would be the height of selfishness to take actions in these first few years of

the 21st Century that would inhibit like-minded people of the 2020s, 2030s, 2040s and mid-century from doing the natural thing and linking up with the Iowa City UUs of those times, because we limited our thinking to church life as we knew it in 2002.

It's natural to have some fear of change, perhaps especially change involving growth. But life itself is change, and growth need not be feared for its own sake. Indeed, don't we think of ourselves as growing spiritually and intellectually as a direct result of our UU learnings? And don't we really believe that our community and world would be better places if they contained many more people who pursue "*A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*," as we affirm and promote in our Fourth Principle?

Peter Thorne

"What we owe the future
is not a new start, for we can only begin
with what has happened. We owe the future
the past, the long knowledge
that is the potency of time to come."
-Wendell Berry-

The stewardship of UUs in Iowa City has brought us to this time and place. We are ready to sow the seeds they have lovingly kept so we may work to provide sustenance while securing seeds for future harvests.

We are a growing congregation with a sound financial base, and a commitment to provide our community with a message of hope and tolerance. We are faced with a decision of whether to renovate our friendly old structure or build a new facility. While some may find it difficult to separate UUSIC from 10 South Gilbert Street, I do not. Certainly what sustains us is the inspiration and energy of current and past UUs and our commitment to intellectual and spiritual growth. This inspiration and commitment is portable. Those who have invested their energy into our lovely old church over the past 94 years have ensured that we are poised to embark on a project to guarantee the health of the Society for another 94 years.

Over the past 21 months that I have served on the Vision Committee, I have developed a greater appreciation of both the myriad activities of the Society and the extent to which we are constrained by our current facilities. Recently, we have evaluated the potential for renovation to address limitations of our facilities. This shows that many problems could be remedied. However, having invested in these renovations, we would still have a facility that would not fully meet our current needs, would not allow for further growth, and would not adequately accommodate people with disabilities. These limitations would compromise our goals and negatively impact membership with significant financial implications.

To ensure the health of the Society for generations to come I believe we should turn our sights toward a new facility. I would support a phased building plan and encourage purchasing sufficient land to allow for future expansion and green space for RE and other Society activities. This would have the added benefit of allowing us to sustain current UUSIC operations while building new facilities.

I began the Vision process with an appreciation of our vitality and a sense that our building was in disrepair but salvageable. I now believe that the costs of renovation are not justified in light of the opportunities a new facility would create. I believe that most of our membership will come to the same conclusion upon their own careful consideration of the proposals. The Society should think beyond current needs, instead opting to build a foundation for an expanded liberal religious presence in the Iowa City Community.

Mike Van Meter

The thought of putting \$1.8million into our existing structure with the attendant debt is a non-starter for me. The same dollars into a new site and building make great sense when taking a "long view" even with only a ten year perspective. When looking out 20 plus years I think it close to irresponsible to invest this kind of effort/capital/debt burden in what we currently have.

Site selection for a new structure will be critical when thinking about how people will respond to the request for capital gifts. If we get lucky we may be able to find a location near the center of Iowa City.

One of the questions we will need to prepare for is something like the following: "What could we get if we only spent half the amount" "Could we stay where we are and not have to take on any debt?" Then in 10 years the bigger question would re-emerge regarding our future.

As someone who initially favored staying where we are the above conclusion is a bit surprising even to me.

Doug Wallace

In regard to our individual most important issues between the two options I will say that since the costs of the two options are the same I'm most concerned about the following in order of importance:

- 1 The choice of renovation limits our future growth potential and in fact locks us in to our present location for up to 20 years if we invest \$1.8 million to do it. We won't be able to afford anything else during this period, as we will not be able to recoup our investment if we decide to sell in 5 to 10 years.
- 2 I think being without a church building for 12 to 15 months may really set the congregation back during a period when we need to be raising more money than ever.
- 3 The major difficulty with a new location and new church structure is deciding on a location. This could be a difficult task as I'm sure there will be a wide range in preferences and desires. Once an acceptable location is chosen I think considerable enthusiasm can be generated for the new church structure.

I think you can see from the above that I am in now in favor of a new building. I'm not very enamored with our current structure, even in its renovated form, so this may be an easier decision for me than someone with a much longer history with the current building.

All of us on the Vision Team would like to thank you for your thoughtful participation in this exciting decision.

Ruth Bonfiglio	Charlie Eastham	Nancy Haley	Amanda Owings
Tom Rocklin	Virginia Stampler	Gordon Strayer	Peter Thorne
Mike Van Meter	Doug Wallace		