

**Community Interviews Summary**  
**FUS Interim Ministry Transition Team**  
**February 2020**

**Background:**

In his work with congregations in transition, the Rev. Doug Wadkins encourages congregations to look outward, to consider the congregation's role and relationships in the world outside its walls. Doug has typically done that work himself, but he changed his approach with FUS. Given the size of the congregation, our long history of community involvement, and the experience, commitment, and engagement of the Transition Team, Doug suggested that Team plan and conduct the interviews. This wasn't merely a practical approach to manage the interim work. It is Doug's observation that if he does the community interviews, no matter how skillful his reporting back, key elements of the interviews will leave with him. Engaging members of the congregation in the interviews deepens our understanding of community issues and strengthens our relationships with community partners.

**Purpose of the interviews**

We identified four primary goals for the interviews:

1. To gather information about perceptions of FUS in the community outside our walls.
2. To understand community needs.
3. To explore future directions that align with our congregation's vision and values.
4. To provide opportunities for members of the congregation to gain a broader perspective on our role in the world by inviting them to participate in the interviews.

**Interview questions and process**

We wanted the interviews to be informal and relationship-building rather than quantitative. Where possible, we invited an FUS member to come along on the interview. In a conversational format, each member of the Team attempted to cover the following:

- We clarified the purpose of the interview as described above.
- To encourage candid responses, we gave assurance that the information would be aggregated, and that specific responses would be confidential.
- We asked about the work of the agency, and what it is that the person being interviewed finds most rewarding in their work.
- We asked interviewees to tell us about their agency's interactions and relationships with FUS.
- We asked interviewees to share with us their perceptions about FUS.
- We learned about what the interviewees see as the community's most pressing needs.
- Finally, we sought to understand how FUS can assist with addressing needs, and suggestions for future connections.

**Categories and criteria**

The selection of the agencies to interview was based primarily on agencies with whom the congregation, teams, and staff have regular and on-going contact and engagement. We also looked at agencies that had been the recipient of our outreach offering over the last few years. Staff (especially Tim Cordon and Drew Collins) were consulted in the possible agencies to be interviewed. We found that the agencies fell into eight different categories, with many representing two or more of these characteristics:

- Social justice and equity
- Accessibility and inclusion
- Education (early childhood through higher education)
- Environmental/ecological justice
- Religious/spiritual institutions
- Public policy
- Music and arts

**Agencies interviewed:**

We initially generated a list of nearly 50 potential interviews, narrowed down to 31. In the end, interviews were conducted with staff from 26 different agencies:

Arts for All Wisconsin	Nehemiah
Badger Camp	Rainbow Project
Centro Hispano	Salvation Army
Christ the Solid Rock Baptist Church	Second Harvest Food Bank
Clean Wisconsin	The Road Home
Driftless Area Conservancy	United Way of Dane County
First United Methodist	Prairie UU
Grace Episcopal Church	UW Morgridge Center
Mad Fiddlers	UW Nelson Institute
Madison Urban Ministry	UW Odyssey Project
Madison Arts Council	Wisconsin Wetlands Association
MMSD Transition Education program	WYSO Music Makers
Moses	YWCA

**Summary of what we learned:** We focus here on three areas: Perceptions of FUS, community needs, and how we can be an effective partner.

**What did we hear about perceptions of FUS?**

Descriptors often used were: Successful, liberal, middle-to-upper class, smart, and not racially diverse.

We were viewed as interested in engaging in the wider community, accepting of everyone’s worth and beliefs, and as a steward of cultural legacy (with specific mention of architecture and music).

We were identified as committed to social justice, and to engaging in social justice efforts in ways that are unifying for the wider community.

Some respondents expressed the opinion that some of us may find it easier to give money than offer our time and talents. Though not a common response, there was a suggestion that some of us may give money to alleviate white guilt.

We heard from some that we underutilize our power to impact change given our numbers and resources, and that we're willing to help but not sure quite how to focus where we can have the greatest effect.

### **What were the agencies' perceptions of community needs?**

- Racial equity and addressing racism.
- Scarcity of resources for the most vulnerable: Mental health and medical services, removing barriers to food security, employment, education, affordable housing, eviction prevention, adequate shelter.
- Conservation issues, environmental quality, sustainability, and global climate change.
- Support for local artists and musicians.

### **How can we be effective partners in addressing community needs?**

#### **Educate ourselves**

Be prepared to follow the lead of people doing the day-to-day work. Be humble. Listen more than we talk. Understand that we have a lot to learn.

Learn from partners what is most needed; do what is needed, not just what interests us. Get out of our comfort zone. Get out of this building and into the community.

Sharpen our tools: Know what skills are needed and what our strengths are. Inform ourselves about the issues and where we can be most effective.

#### **Support**

Continue the outreach offerings and other forms of financial support. In addition to the funding, these efforts provide much needed visibility for the agencies working in the community.

Volunteer our time. Provide "behind the scenes" work/support services that free up the agency's professional staff to provide direct service. Do the "grunt work," sweep the floors, serve the meals, pick up trash, serve on Boards. It's all essential.

Develop a "rapid response" process that draws members into calls for action. Be prepared to respond to calls for action. Show up, write targeted, and well-informed letters.

Continue to seek ways to make use of our exceptional space to support local performers/artists/groups.

### **Collaboration**

Continue to engage in existing community partnerships (via senior staff leadership, staff, and members, as appropriate).

Host information sessions that highlight the work of the agencies.

Seek opportunities to invite coalition groups to use FUS space in order to encourage/support these inter-agency collaborations.

Explore ways to engage the Children's Religious Education and youth programs in identified community needs (e.g., through Faith in Action curriculum).

### **Deepening our understanding, continuing the conversation**

We will be exploring community connections, in a series of three Sunday Hearth-side CHAT sessions during February and March. These one-hour group discussions will be in the Gaebler living room of the Wright-designed historic Meeting House. Join us on February 16, 23, and March 1 from 12:30 pm to 1:30 pm.

- February 16 HUMANITIES: The UW Continuing Studies Odyssey Project recognizes the power of arts and humanities for learning, progress, and justice to empower adults and family members at the poverty level, to overcome adversity, and achieve dreams through further education. People from the Odyssey Project will discuss with CHAT participants, recent efforts, and future opportunities for cooperation,
- February 23 JUSTICE: People from three local faith communities (Episcopal, United Methodist, UU) plan to share past outreach experience on social justice and distinctive ways of helping. Recent experience with the local voices network (LVN) is enabling local people to share discussions of publications. People from various faith communities can share distinctive ways of helping related to hunger, green teams, housing, and restorative justice.
- March 1 ENVIRONMENT: The UW Nelson Institute of Environmental Studies, with its Wisconsin Idea outreach activities, includes able scholars from many departments who can help people with awareness and understanding regarding prevention and sustainability, related to air, land, water, and plant issues. An increasing number of members from faith communities and voluntary associations are recognizing that such stewardship is an important priority. Several FUS councils are active.