

**Religious Education
Inventory of Information
“How Are We Doing and What Do We Want to Do Analysis”**

Enrollment

- 75 in 2002
- 88 in 2003
- 73 in 2004
- 78 in 2005
- While the attendance numbers have not been tracked as closely as enrollment numbers, it is possible that there was a decline in participation this year that will be reflected in the 2006 enrollment numbers. This is possibly related to our experimentation with Workshop Rotation and Spirit Play as new models of Religious Education.

Demographics

- Olympia School District enrollment has been approximately 9,000 plus or minus two hundred over the last 5 years. There has been a slight drop in enrollment over the last three years. From Bob Wolpert at an Olympia School District Meeting this winter: “We are seeing, a one to three percent growth in new construction, but new homes in Olympia do not generate as many students as homes constructed five to seven years ago. The homes are smaller and seem to attract very young couples or 'empty nesters.'”
- According to the Thurston Regional Planning Council (TRPC), Olympia’s median age is increasing, and is already above the median age elsewhere in the state. The county is described as “an aging county” by the TRPC.
- At least twice in the last four years, the Unitarian Universalist has reported a decline in Religious Education enrollment overall in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. Mainline denominations of all types are reporting similar attrition.

What Has Been Done

- In the spring of 2005, the Religious Education Committee solicited feedback from the congregation about four models of Religious Education that were revitalizing RE programs elsewhere. This included a survey and two forums open to anyone who wished to provide input in the process. While participation was not particularly high, enough feedback was received and it was slanted enough in one direction that we were able to make a commitment to the two models we’ve been trying this year.
- In the fall of 2005, we publicized for parents and began using two new models of Religious Education: Workshop Rotation at the 9:15am service and Spirit Play at the 11:00 service. A few families chose not to try the new models. Most came and tried the models, and a few new families even joined us. However, simultaneously as we experienced challenges relating to learning a whole new way of doing things, especially without as much volunteer commitment as was hoped, we did notice a possible drop in participation. Toward the end of the year we began to feel we were more “in the groove,” and at that time, participation leveled off. Then, we had a

volunteer shortage in recent weeks, and again participation dropped some. It is unclear whether this is a temporary or permanent change in participation.

- In early spring of 2006, we conducted a survey to take the temperature of parents. This allowed us to get feedback about our new models, and about RE in general (including for the youth programs). The survey feedback provided no areas of particular concern, though it certainly did indicate some strengths and weaknesses. For instance, while most kids did speak positively about class after attending, a number did not look forward to coming to church on a weekly basis.
- I (Sierra-Marie) have begun “coffee talk” with parents, which will continue through the summer. What this means is that I am getting together with parents one on one or in small groups and asking them to share their dreams for the Religious Education program and their participation at church. I have been pleasantly surprised by the number of parents so far who have expressed enjoyment of the new model of Religious Education.
- After evaluating the surveys in the spring of 2006, the RE Committee made the decision to continue the planned second year experiment with Workshop Rotation and Spirit Play. However, the RE Committee is currently discussing modifications, including perhaps going back to a more traditional model of Church School, or using Spirit Play, with the 9:15am preschool class. Planning for fall of 2006 is beginning now, and will take us through the summer.
- The Religious Education Committee had also taken some time in the spring of 2005 to discuss other ways we could better welcome and celebrate families with children. We have not yet been able to fully implement or try these, but ideas included:
 - Serving the middle school group and its volunteers better
 - Serving the high school group and its volunteers better
 - Possibly implementing any number of ways of ministering to families beyond what happens in RE (such as matching families with similar interests when they join the congregation, having family fun nights or catered family dinners, and other ways of helping families make friends in the congregation)
 - Creating annual traditions and rituals that serve our current needs and desires
- With incoming members of the RE Committee in the 2005-2006 church year, more ideas have been brainstormed. These include supporting an effort to make church more welcoming to children and their families by refining how we approach the concept of kids in the sanctuary for worship, and setting up a coffee hour station in the back hall.

The Promise

Olympia is a unique community in the south Puget Sound region. There are people in our community who are searching for a religious home like ours.

We have shown a willingness to create new visions for the future of our Religious Education, to experiment and take risks. We are eager and willing to change with the

times, and to make sure that our liberal religious voice is accessible to all families in the Olympia area—now and in the years to come.

We draw from a wide circle in Olympia and surrounding communities, with a small handful of families driving about one hour to be in Olympia for worship and Religious Education on Sunday mornings.

We have a core of active, participating families that grows each year. Our attendance has been historically high in proportion to our numbers of registered children, and not just because we don't do a good enough job in making sure that all participating children are registered.

We are an innovative and creative bunch. The annual Yule Play is one way in which we have witnessed our own creativity in action. We have members from a wide variety of backgrounds with a wide variety of interests and talents. We have many resources, when we effectively use them...

The Challenge

- Volunteer shortages—there are so many opportunities to be involved and in so many ways. We're a congregation that has a lot of programs but that hasn't quite yet grown in numbers to fully support those programs without burnout. This is perhaps the single largest and most significant challenge in Religious Education programming.
- Helping families make friends here—space limitations, knowing how to be welcoming and practicing friendliness, more of a committee focus than a social focus, challenges related to adventures in growing and growing pains, a need for rituals and traditions that are appealing and engaging to the families we have now and in our current times, etc.
- Varying expectations about ideal programs—amount of structure, who leads and how, etc.
- Welcoming and integrating newcomers. This is a large challenge for the congregation as a whole, and especially significant for families with children who are perhaps the most likely to leave early on if they don't feel they are being integrated.
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