

UNITED CHURCH *of* UNDERHILL

2016 Listening Campaign Report for the United Church of Underhill

as of June 15th, 2016

- **OVERVIEW & TIMELINE** – As part of the “Strategic Investment in Sacred Places” (SISP), program led by national nonprofit, Partners for Sacred Places in partnership with the Vermont Conference, United Church of Christ, and in conversation with our SISP consultants, the United Church of Underhill engaged in a community “listening campaign” from January through April 2016. During this time, 13 listeners, trained by Rev. Debbie Ingram of Vermont Interfaith Action for effective face-to-face listening campaigns, conducted approximately 60 visits with individuals and families.
The campaign was divided into two phases: 1) an “internal” campaign where visits were conducted with members and friends of the United Church of Underhill (who are also members of the Jericho/Underhill community); and 2) an “external” campaign where visits were conducted with members of the wider Jericho/Underhill community.
 - **GUIDING QUESTIONS** – Informed by our training in Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) by Partners for Sacred Places, our listening sessions were guided by two simple questions: 1) what **assets** do you identify in your community? and 2) what **needs** do you identify in your community?
 - **METHODOLOGY** – The question of who to visit is both challenging and an issue of justice. How do we utilize our finite time and volunteer resources to listen to as many people as possible, while ensuring that we do not exclude the voices of our neighbors, especially those who have been rendered voiceless due to poverty, age, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.? Admittedly, the methodology of this listening campaign is imperfect and there are still more voices from which we need to hear. Conscious of this fact, but with a desire and a call to action (see “purpose” below), we listened in the following way:
 - **Geographical Area** - Our focus was primarily on the towns of Jericho and Underhill. Along the way we did visit with a few individuals who lived outside of this area (Richmond, Winooski and Colchester). We also visited with organizers of a youth summer camp in Richmond and attended a community forum on crime and addiction in Richmond.
 - **Listeners** - As a program of the United Church of Underhill, the listeners were all members or friends of the church.
 - **Visited** - Our goal was to visit as many “pockets” within the community as possible. Here is an overview:

• Libraries	• Schools	• Businesses	• Town offices	• Food Shelf Boards & Clients
• Senior Groups	• Police	• Service Clubs	• Youth Camps	• Harvest Market Attendees
• Churches	• Arts	• Front Porch Forum Posts	• Farmers’ Markets	• Comm. Forum on Addiction
• Parks	• Medical	• Special Needs	• Politicians	• Gun Violence Study
- At each visit, listeners were instructed to ask: who else should we visit? This helped us to broaden our scope and to include voices we would not otherwise have heard. **In total, we made approximately 60 face-to-face visits (this total does NOT include information we collected from Front Porch Forum posts).**
- **Visits** – Visits were initiated by our listeners, usually lasted no more than 1 hour, were mostly conducted face-to-face (one listener), with meetings taking place in a variety of locations (private homes, workplaces, church, etc.). The conversations were guided by our “guiding questions” (see above). (Note: Listening at forum on addiction, gun violence study, and at Harvest Market was more general).
 - **Report Foci** - Guided by the data, the information was compiled and categorized into 9 focus areas: *basic needs, children, youth and families, health and safety, community services, organizations and businesses, education, environmental and human resources, education, communication, and spiritual.*

- **PURPOSE**

- **UCU MISSION STATEMENT:** *The mission of the United Church of Underhill is to be a Christian community offering spiritual growth to all and **responding to the needs of people according to the teachings of Jesus Christ**. We are in covenant and connection with the people of the United Church of Christ and the United Methodist Church.*
- **LISTENING CAMPAIGN PURPOSE STATEMENT:** *Our hope and prayer is that the listening campaign will help us at UCU to clarify our call and find that sweet spot where **what God wants for us**, what we are **capable of**, and what **the community needs most**, meet to become good news for all.*



- **LISTENER'S PRAYER** - *Spirit, give us ears to listen to our friends and neighbors. Give us clarity and discernment. Keep us safe, though not necessarily comfortable. And when our listening is done, give us mouths to speak and hands for action that is just, and powerful, and good news for all. AMEN*

Bold = identified by more than a few participants

FOCUS 1: Basic Needs – Food, Shelter & Transportation

Assets - Participants identified an abundance of services that meet basic human needs:

- **Church-based community dinners & food shelves**
- State/Federal programs
- local farms/farmer's markets
- **SSTA Senior transportation**
- Some senior-housing units

“Safe housing is a vaccine, leading to decreased illness”

- Potential new food shelf in Essex
- Vacation/weekend meals for students
- Openness to local food movement
- Sidewalks in some neighborhoods
- Support & Services at Home (SASH) Program
- Meals-on-Wheels
- free/reduced school lunch
- Openness to sustainable energy
- **CCTA Commuter bus**

Needs - Participants identified significant needs in three key areas:

- **public transportation (inc. expanded sidewalks & bike paths)**
- **food insecurity (especially in young and elderly)**
- **affordable housing**

FOCUS 2: Children, Youth & Families

Assets – There were only a handful of assets identified related to children, youth and families:

- Summer camps such as *Jericho Rec. & Our Community Cares*
- **Old Fashioned Harvest Market** (UCU & Community)
- Youth groups (e.g. church groups/scouting/4H)
- Arts enrichment programs
- Sports leagues (school & non-school)

Needs - Participants identified needs in the following areas:

- Activities for families that fit with family schedules
- Affordable enrichment programs
- Relieve Deborah Rawson Library from serving as child-care center
- **Outreach to families in need**
- Safe teen center
- **Community ice rink**
- Affordable childcare
- End to generational poverty

FOCUS 3: Health & Safety

Assets – Participants identified health and safety assets in the following areas:

- **Programs for seniors (XYZ lunches, CVAA, SASH Program)**
- Much used Medical equipment loans (UCU)
- Quality fire/police/emergency medical services
- Howard Center Services

Needs - Participants identified needs in the following areas:

- **Treatment for drug addiction**
- Services to help seniors live in their homes safely
- **Rising crime rates**
- Outreach to veterans
- **Local medical & dental care**
- Seasonal heat assistance

Bold = identified by more than a few participants

FOCUS 4: Community Services, Organizations & Businesses

Note: this was the focus area that participants responded to most often (both needs and assets)

Assets – Participants identified an abundance of assets:

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| • Libraries | • UCU Clutter Barn | • Summer concerts in the Park |
| • Service organizations (e.g. Lions, Leos, Masons) | • Jericho Community Center | • Sports leagues |
| • Individual artists & organizers of art events | • Art studio space in towns | • Poor House Pies |
| • New businesses (Jericho Mkt., Dollar General, Underhill Co-op) | • Legacy businesses (e.g. Joe’s/country stores) | • Business zones (Underhill Flats, Rt. 15) |
| • Farmers’ Markets | • Emergency Funds (e.g. UCS PTO Sunshine/EJU Ministries Fund) | |

Needs – In many cases, participants identified the need to do more of what we are already doing well.

Expanding library programs, more buying days at the UCU Clutter Barn, more organized sports and recreational activities, more arts space and events, more restaurants and local businesses etc. were all mentioned. In addition, the following needs were identified:

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| • Personal commitment to clean up after pets/trash | • Deeper Community Relationships | • Better building/zoning codes |
| • Increased participation in town government | • More local jobs | • A more vibrant local economy |
| • Local exercise facility | | |

FOCUS 5: Education

Assets - Education assets identified by participants can be broadly broken down into two main categories:

Programs/Curriculum

- Arts and Music
- Adult education at MMU
- Full-time preschool
- Mansfield Academy
- MMU tech programs
- Vermont Parent Info Center
- Strong academics in public schools

People/Relationships

- School buildings open for community events
- **Engaged parents and dedicated teachers**
- School boards and administrators
- Saxon Hill partnership with the ID school
- Good relationships between schools & community
- Community support of school budgets (small increases from year-to-year)

Needs – The needs identified by participants were:

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| • Increased eligibility for summer school opportunities | • Healthy eating education | • Too much homework |
| • Art education and language for talking about art | • General student population decline | • Education re: sexual/gender identity |
| • Increase in # of students with special needs at elementary level | • Working parents less able to volunteer in the schools | |

“The partnership between the Saxon Hill and ID Schools is a great model for others to follow.”

Bold = identified by more than a few participants

FOCUS 6: Environmental & Human Resources

Assets: Environmental – Many participants mentioned the natural beauty as one of our greatest assets. There was much excitement about **Mills Riverside Park, Mobbs Farm, the mountains, and our open spaces**. Many participants also mentioned the **relative quiet and safety of our towns, laid back Vermont attitude, and the healthy food that comes from our local farms**.

Needs: Environmental - Many participants voiced concerns about the suburbanization of Jericho and Underhill which is becoming more and more of a bedroom community. New construction (e.g. Dollar General, Jericho Market), reduction of open spaces, and increased traffic were also of concern to many.

Assets: Human – Many participants named the **warm and generous spirit of Vermonters and the willingness by many to give their time and resources for the common good**. Political savvy, diversity of opinions and beliefs, and a general openness to diversity and inclusivity were also named as key assets. The close relationship between the towns of Jericho and Underhill were also named.

Needs: Human – Concerns were expressed about:

- Stagnant population growth
- Lack of racial/cultural diversity
- Aging population
- Reserved Vermonters make it difficult to develop relationships
- Lack of young families

FOCUS 7: Communication

Assets – The assets identified were all related to media outlets: **Front Porch Forum & Mountain Gazette were mentioned most often**. Essex-Jericho-Underhill Ecumenical Ministries and Clark’s Truck Center sign were also mentioned as good methods of communication.

Needs – Identified needs can be broadly broken down into two main categories:

Media Outlets

- Information packets to give to new community members
- Better community activity calendar
- Better arts calendar

Relationships

- Pastors & school principals need to meet
- Lots of different micro-communities with a need to build bridges between them
- Better communication within arts community
- Better communication between schools and arts community
- Better communication between schools and general community

“We have a wonderful arts community, but not enough people know about it.”

FOCUS 8: Spiritual

Assets – The spiritual assets that were identified were mostly related to formal Christian church institutions:

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- Diversity of church traditions, membership and worship
 - Churches host weddings and funerals
 - Spiritual education
 - Good church-community relationships (e.g. Harvest Market)
 - Ecumenical partnerships
 - Worship services
 - Spiritual care services
 - **Warm church congregations**
 - Many ministries (all ages)
 - Service and outreach

Needs – The needs identified can be broken down into two categories:

Programs

- Need for more church-based youth and family programs
- More ecumenical activities & community-wide events
- Churches to support food for youth in summer programs
- More community space needed in some churches

Needs Specific to UCU

- Emphasize UCU's inclusivity
- Partnerships to help with programs (e.g. Harvest Market, Clutter Barn, Community Dinner)
- Streamline our programs to sharpen focus
- Desire to divest of some church properties to free up resources
- Desire to get to know other church members better. Video/written bios.

REFLECTIONS

Through UCU's work with Partners for Sacred Places, our planning team identified 4 historic "heritage themes" that have run throughout the missions and ministries of UCU over time. These heritage themes are: *Community Partnerships, Inclusivity, Feeding (Physically & Spiritually), Doing a Lot With a Little* (see our *PiSP Heritage Story*, written by Gary Irish). Below are reflections about each of these heritage themes in light of this listening campaign report.

Community Partnerships – UCU has never been an island unto itself. For proof of that we need only look to our calendar which is filled with evidence of longstanding partnership with community groups like the Lions Club, the Water Board, and Scouts, not to mention the Old Fashioned Harvest Market. This report identifies many community groups where the potential exists for new and/or deeper partnerships that could bring vitality for all. This report also raises questions about who God is calling us to partner with. **The good news is that UCU knows how to develop partnerships, it is something we have done for a long time and are good at, and we now have this listening campaign report to assist us as we discern God's call.**

Inclusivity – UCU in its very nature is ecumenical. It was created from a merger in 1973 of two distinct congregations representing two distinct Christian traditions (UCC and UMC). As our ancestor Ed Moore said on many occasions before his death in 2016, "the success of our merger was due to our ability to focus on what we agreed about, not what we disagreed about." This statement reflects a core value and practice of UCU of being inclusive of those who are like us and those who are not like us. Throughout this report, it is clear that many opportunities exist for UCU to develop deeper partnerships, not only with groups just like us, but with many and diverse individuals/groups/institutions who are not like us. **As our church discerns ways that we might respond to this report, it is important that we remember our core value and practice of inclusivity.**

Feeding (Physically & Spiritually) – This report makes it clear that there is both physical and spiritual hunger in our towns. UCU's success and longevity in addressing both of these hungers over time is closely connected to our ability to keep them in balance with one another as modeled for us in Scripture (*e.g. Acts 6*). Rather than address physical hunger at the expense of spiritual hunger, or to address spiritual hunger at the expense of physical hunger, UCU has done both at the same time with great success. **Going forward, if we are to address the hungers in our towns in new ways and with new partners, it is essential that we address both physical and spiritual hungers together.**

Doing a Lot with a Little - This report identifies an abundance of both assets and needs in our communities. There is a danger that this information will make us feel overwhelmed and keep us frozen in place. Our history, though, pushes back against that possibility and reminds us that for a very long time UCU has been able to engage in many important, big, and transformational ministries with limited resources. Can we do everything? No. But can we do a lot with a little? Yes. **We have in the past and, in faith, we will be able to do so again. May it be so in Christ's name and for the life of us all.**

NEXT STEPS

This listening campaign report is **not a goal but a tool** to be used by UCU and its partners for action. In the coming days, versions of this report will: 1) be **shared with the Church Council, members and friends** of UCU; 2) be **shared with our listeners and those they visited**; 3) be made **available to the wider Jericho and Underhill** communities; 4) be used to **lead conversations and develop partnerships between UCU and the wider community**, 5) lead to the **establishment of a timeline for UCU and its community partners** to utilize its assets to meet identified needs. Through conversation, discernment and action, we pray that we will be able "*to clarify our call and find that sweet spot where what God wants for us, what we are capable of, and what the community needs most, meet to become good news for all.*"

STILL LISTENING – If you have some thoughts to share, please contact the United Church of Underhill at 802-899-1722 or rev.kevg@yahoo.com. Thank you!