

Sunday Program and Service Leader Schedule

1 February

9:15—Adult Religious Education, Building Your Own Theology

10:40—Cindy Brown, a seminary student in her final year at the Chandler School of Theology will present a program entitled “Power of Ritual: Focusing on Family Rituals”.

Service Leader—Paul Lee

Opener—Rick Spradlin, Closer—Pat Hart, Greeters—Bob Gross & Marge Hall

8 February

9:15—Adult Religious Education: Building Your Own Theology

10.40—Rev. Ernestine Mathis will present a program of “Poetry and Prose”.

Service Leader—Mona Crawford.

Opener—Pat Hart, Closer—Gerda Smith, Greeters—Tanya Davis & Nancy Awtrey

15 February

9:15—Adult Religious Education: Building Your Own Theology

10.40—Norm Horofker will be speaking to the Fellowship on, “To Teach the Fragile Art of Hospitality”.

Service Leader—Barry White

Opener—Gerda Smith, Closer—Julie Bouchard, Greeters—Barry White & John Studstill

22 February

9:15—Adult Religious Education: Building Your Own Theology

10:40—Rev. Ed Wilson will be speaking on, “Faith and/or Fidelity”.

Service Leader—Rev. Ernestine Mathis

Opener—Julie Bouchard, Closer—Janet & Norm Horofker,

Greeters—Mona Crawford & Mark Berger

February Birthdays

Chris Nix 22 February

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"The Fellowship 2007 and 2008" by John Studstill

Fellow UUs, friends and visitors, This is not going to be a "State of the Fellowship" address. That would be too pompous. Bill Edwards, our new VP for Programs, didn't spell out in detail what he wanted me to do today, but I believe he had in mind that, despite my deficiencies, I might have learned something in the last two years that I could share with all. I'm not sure about that, but I do want to recall a few events, and a few things to possibly be termed "achievements" of our recent Board. Then maybe at the conclusion we can hear reactions from you to my remarks, and we can discuss together a few goals that we hope to accomplish in coming years. I do believe we have made some significant strides to solidify our fellowship, and have not backslid too much --I think we have at least held together pretty well during these years on a firm organizational and religious footing.

One of the first significant things that happened during my term was the tragic death of Larry Lakey, our former Administrative Assistant. According to my notes this took place on Feb. 1, 2007. Many of you will remember that Larry had disappeared several weeks before that and we had already moved to hire Brenda Stevens to replace him. I point out for some of our newer members that the white camellia bush just out front under the pine trees was planted in memory of Larry who was a member here for several years before his untimely passing. I speak for myself when I say that, although several of our Fellowship counseled with Larry when we realized that he was going through some depressing times, we no doubt could have done more to support and console him about whatever problems he was experiencing. I know also that I speak not only for myself, because others have expressed similar thoughts to me. But we have no idea if more effort on our parts could have made much difference in the ultimate result. It is only minor consolation to me that Larry apparently died of a heart attack and not from his own hand, though his disappearance without so much as a goodbye to any of our Fellowship was a bit hard to take. If there is any lesson to learn from this experience, I would say it is probably that some of us have resolved to try to be more sensitive to members of our Fellowship if we discover they are going through some trial, and that we want to create an atmosphere of acceptance that will allow all to more openly share their trials and tribulations with us.

On July 27 of this year a tragedy also struck a UU congregation in Knoxville, Tennessee. Reporters from UU News had a similar reaction to ours: "what could we have done to head this off? No one knows, but I do believe we need to do a better job in keeping up with all our members when they are absent from services, when they are sick or seem to be in need. A great recovery from the loss of Larry was made when we hired Brenda Stevens as our new Admin Asst. She agreed to take the job only for a few weeks until we could find a suitable replacement and I even wrote an ad to put in the paper for recruitment. I remember asking Brenda several times if she didn't mind staying on for a few weeks more. Gradually my inquiries were spaced farther and farther apart as I and the board, noticing all the great work she was doing, began to hope she would just forget completely that original idea. Is there a lesson for us here? Maybe this: Please everyone, don't remember to remind her of her earlier thought! One idea that was at first nosed around, was that we should go outside the Fellowship for an Admin. Asst. That argument, in the present Brenda Era seems much less persuasive.

As I was assuming my duties, we were still straightening out some bookkeeping difficulties, dare I say, the bookkeeping fiasco. Janet Horofker was invaluable in helping find our new outside bookkeeper and helping her deal with the IRS, with the loss of records and with unpaid taxes. Our previous treasurer who is no longer here [despite being a great guy in many ways] had allowed things financial to become very confused. One lesson learned from these events is that the board needs to pay careful attention to finances and records. With Julie Bouchard in charge as treasurer, I am happy to report, we have become like a well-oiled machine in that sector. Hiring an outside bookkeeper seems to have been a correct move.

Last week I mentioned something that also occurred shortly after I began my duties as president in the spring of 2007. The Board agreed to humor my request to host a visiting group, so I camped out overnight here with the Veterans for Peace who were passing through Columbus. They spoke at Columbus State and over the weekend attempted to meet and recruit some more members among the Fort Benning soldiers. I heard some interesting stories from older Vietnam veterans and from younger vets of the three Middle Eastern wars we have been involved in recently (Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Iraq). The significance for us is that the Board revisited the whole issue of accepting overnight groups, including the SOA Watch youth, mostly Unitarian, whom we had hosted in the past. I don't know all the history of how we were led to accept these out-of-town visitors in previous years, but I do know it was a somewhat divisive issue earlier on, and by the time of my tenure many had concluded that it was not a good idea. The Board decision was that the Fellowship Building could not be used for overnight stays, except on in very exceptional cases such as a natural disaster where shelter for the homeless might be urgently needed. Although I understand that insurance and liability issues could potentially be involved, I am not totally happy with this decision, though I concurred in it, simply because I want our Fellowship to remain actively engaged in community affairs, controversial though they might be.

Another great recovery that was stimulated by these changes was the decision by the Social Action Committee under the leadership of Norm Horofker and others to engage the military community and Fort Benning soldiers in a more positive way. This involved offering some free baby-sitting for military families, and eventually adopting the project initiated by a Fort Benning soldier to provide shoes and clothing for Afghani children. This turns out to be a very positive action, I believe we can all agree, and yet we are still getting calls to host, on an individual basis, visitors to either the SOA Watch or the God Bless Fort Benning events. I hope some of us will continue to be involved I that way.

Let me mention a third contentious issue that was debated several times last year--which groups should be allowed to hold programs or events in our facility, and who should be obliged to pay a rental fee? Without going into too much detail, I will simply say that the Board so far has decided that UU members should be allowed to organize personal events such as when a family member is being married without paying a rental fee, but non-members will pay a fee in addition to providing clean-up. A related problem arose when a sub-group of our Fellowship with so-called "pagan" ties wished to hold ceremonial events or services and advertise them as such. Some wondered if this would give the larger community of Columbus the impression that Unitarians are basically pagan? We decided that so long as the group was led by our own members, was sensitive to the issue of public perceptions, and did not advertise themselves in a way that would make all UUs seem to be pagans, we could live with them--after all, to be true to our own traditions, we must accept a great variety of expressions of religious identity. This led Dr. Tishken, one of the leaders of this group, to offer a number of programs for the whole Fellowship that helped explain what these pagan traditions are about. I believe it was a meaningful enlargement of my and other's knowledge of paganism. I know that many enjoyed on several Halloweens-slash-All Saints Days pouring libations to our recently departed relatives and ancestors in the little graveyard up the street. During the latter part of this year the pagan group has not renewed its request for the UU space, but we certainly remain open to collaborating with groups with a diversity of religious views.

In some ways, accepting a pagan group was comparable to the recent decision to declare ourselves as a "Welcoming Fellowship," that is, one openly welcoming of Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgender people. Here again, some members have expressed a concern that we not be seen by the larger Columbus community as a quote "Gay Church," but this seems unlikely, particularly since most other liberal churches are opening up to the GLBT citizenry. I point to a number of events and programs at St. Thomas Episcopal that have gone even further than we have to advertise their liberal attitudes about this contentious issue. I am thinking particularly of their presentation this year of the drama "The Laramie Project." The play highlights the murder of a gay student in Laramie, Wyoming a few years ago.

I take away from all these events just described that we at the UUFC, like our fellow UUs in Knoxville and elsewhere, are a liberal and inclusive Fellowship--we cannot pretend to be conservative in our theology nor in our stance on the major social issues of our day, nor should we. While some of us may be conservative on certain economic and political issues, I do not believe we should try to camouflage our adoption of the basic values of anti-racism, and anti-discrimination. We should brag of our positions on ethnic inclusiveness, the embracing of ecumenism and religious diversity, as well as our commitment to the separation of Church and State. While we do not like the idea of Islamic or Christian or Hindu theocratic states, we believe in engaging in dialog with those who do--to wit the recent Indian/Muslim speaker Sanjay invited. I think most of us believe in rationality and a rational approach to religion more than in faith; and besides reason, tolerance, and freedom, we also embrace the ideals of love from Christianity, justice from Judaism and the search for peace in the world to which all religions give at least lip-service. More than most, we believe in internationalism, accepting needy immigrants to our shores, and energetic efforts at cross-cultural communication. To this end, I believe we have more programs about contentious moral, political, and social topics than any other congregation in Columbus. Certainly we have studied more about Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism in the last two years than any other church in the area. And we are gradually becoming more active in promoting environmentalism, conservation and green solutions. But we could do more in that area.

We have completed some notable construction projects--the reconstruction of the deck outside, made necessary by the plumbing repair project accomplished under Rick Spradlin's presidency. Rick organized the deck project and the repainting project which involved painting all buildings and recaulking of windows, etc. etc. Everyone should congratulate themselves who pitched in here as they did with the Yard Sales that have been so successful under the leadership of Shirley Gray and Gerda Smith.

Now, a few things I hope we address, improve on, or accomplish in the coming months: helping Rick as our director of Religious Ed to provide ongoing meaningful instruction for our youth. Helping Brenda and Paul with information for our reorganized website and Newsletter. Helping Barry initiate some new excursions and outings, as he used to often say, for youth of all ages. I can't enumerate all the achievements and great efforts that you all make to keep our fellowship running smoothly, openers, closers, organizers of parties and programs, nor can I suggest all the new things that need to be done, but certainly the leadership of the building committee and the work of the new greeters committee deserves mention. We must look forward to the day when we will have a new facility, and an enlarged membership. Right now I am just hoping to see the new-Sign project completed out front.

In conclusion, thank you all very much for allowing me to serve in this capacity. If I didn't have such a busy job teaching at Columbus State, and a 94-year-old father who has required a lot of attention these last two years, I think I could have done a better job, but many have stepped forward with new and creative ideas and energy to carry them out. Now, Barry and I are working on just one last joint project--we plan to convert our wives to full-time UU members. Well, no, let's just say this is another area where we both are seeking growth and learning. There are many families in the U.S. today, in this multi-ethnic, religiously diverse society we live in who are forced to organize their religious activities around more than one organization and more than one belief system. Thankfully, we UUs do not feel compelled to convert anyone. With our inclusive theology, we are most apt to be able to adjust and be tolerant and appreciative of others' religions and belief systems. I am constantly reminded that our religion, which even allows for atheists in our circle, is most congenial to anthropologists like myself. Our religious relativism is very

congruent with cultural relativism--and that is the foundation on which Cultural Anthropology is built. However, I cannot resist a parting shot at Christianity: if Christians would just realize that Jesus was not asking them to have all their dogmas lined up perfectly in a row, that he didn't require them to check their brains at the door of the church nor to believe in him by blind faith, that he was not even saying that they have to believe in his divinity and resurrection, walking on water, etc., but rather that he was asking his followers to try to put others first, to put themselves last, to live a life of service, love and self-sacrifice for the good of others--family, friends and even enemies--if they could realize that that is what the great teacher was asking, admittedly an almost superhuman request, then perhaps Christians and UUs could both find a new morality and set of goals together. That accomplished, they could then turn to finding Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and others who could adhere to these same goals and eventually create one small but crucial commonality for all humanity.

Contract for a friend by Ernestine Mathis

This is a great piece that you can send to your friends.

Dear (put your friend's name here),

After serious and cautious consideration . . . your contract of friendship has been renewed for the New Year 2009. It was a very hard decision to make. So try not to screw it up!!! This is my wish for you in 2009. May peace break into your house and may thieves come to steal your debts. May the pockets of your jeans become a magnet for \$100 bills. May love stick to your face like Vaseline and may laughter assault your lips. May your clothes smell of success like smoking tires and may happiness slap you across the face and may your tears always be tears of joy. May the problems you had forget your home address! In simple words . . . May 2009 be the best year of your life!