

# Potomac Partnership Group Story Gathering FAQs

## **What is the PPG? How did it come into existence? Who is a member of the PPG?**

- The PPG, or Potomac Partnership Group, was convened by the senior ministers of the Fairfax, River Road, and Cedar Lane congregations. Having already had dialog about the changing landscape of organized religion in the 21st century, Revs Abhi, David, and Nancy discerned that the pandemic was not manifesting brand new challenges for congregations and Unitarian Universalism, so much as revealing the depth of the challenges. And they saw that this unique moment could provide opportunities for shared learning and growth.
- The senior ministers solicited lay volunteers to join this working/thought group, which began meeting via Zoom in June, 2020. By late summer, the group began to articulate next steps, the sources of which are detailed below.

## **As members of the UU faith, what are the spiritual and practical dimensions of the pandemic and its impact on our faith community?**

- Amidst this upheaval in our lives, spiritual and societal connections have been upended and cannot be met in the previous modalities we have become accustomed to.
- People within our communities have suffered from COVID-19, but many more are affected by other mental and physical health challenges, and many people face isolation that is linked to depression, substance abuse and other manifestations of the stress and anxiety associated with the pandemic.,
- Group gatherings, close contact with our fellow congregants through worship, social justice, religious education and fellowship events have been limited by social distancing requirements and health protocols.
- Our congregations face financial challenges as our members and friends have suffered losses of income and our congregants are limited in our ability to engage each other in deep relational interventions.

## **Have we observed any unexpected benefits of the impacts of the pandemic?**

- Through online, virtual meetings and worship services, we have found that some shortcomings of our previous practices can also be ameliorated. Reductions in the time and cost of commuting to events and the relative ease of participating in services, meetings and social networks have allowed some congregants to continue with their involvement in worship, social justice and even social events in the Zoom paradigm.
- Connections among members and friends who might not normally interact with one another have helped to erode some of the ingrained silos which have tended to keep people mostly within separate groups that might not interact with others.

## **How can we modify our practices in ways that allow our congregations to provide deeper religious enrichment to our congregants?**

- The challenges we face are existential in nature - we may never be able to go back to our previous ways of “doing church,” and this will have implications in our congregations’ viability and sustainability. The question for us all is, “Can we adapt and adopt new ways of interacting that will build back our religious systems better than they were before the COVID pandemic?”
- The three senior ministers of our congregations (Cedar Lane, Fairfax and River Road Unitarian Universalist congregations) have initiated an exploration of the ways that we might reimagine church and modify our current ways of operating.

## **How will we gather members’ stories to shape our collective reach and sustainability?**

- The PPG will facilitate the collection of stories to better understand the desires of our members (as well as cohorts of non-members) to incorporate potential structural, operational and communal changes. The goal is to satisfy our spiritual needs more extensively and intensively.
- While improving our effectiveness in meeting the needs of our communities, we can also achieve improvements in efficiency by optimizing the use of our resources including our personnel, buildings and grounds and financial assets.
- The PPG will solicit stories and comments from our current and potential members to determine the nature of the needs that they have and how we might better fulfill them. We intend to gather personal stories, reflections and assessments of how well our UU institutions are providing the opportunities to grow in spirit, intellect, education and social justice.

## **How will members’ stories be gathered?**

- The PPG will initially reach out to a number of congregants from each of the three institutions to facilitate the collection of stories.
- We will also invite all congregants to respond to the same questions in written form.
- The objective is to elicit deep reflection and personal stories to help inform the decision making of the ministers and leaders.

## **What other general information about this process can you provide?**

- The focus will be on the aspirational and inspirational means to better serve the collective mission of our UU congregations.
- We know that change can be hard, and there can be no growth without loss. We are looking for ways to better meet the emotional, spiritual and ethical needs of our members and potential members.
- While our congregations may look very different in five or ten years, we would like to say that when faced with the challenges of 2020, we decided to build back better than we were before. With your insight and perspective, we look forward to realizing that goal.