

Application to Other Churches

A cultural shift takes time. Ten years ago, JUC was not known as a place where visitors felt warmly welcomed, as we are today, and we didn't speak of expectations of financial or volunteer support to our prospective new members. Our minister at the time, Rev. Robert Latham, introduced us to the concept of shared ministry and encouraged us as we developed a mission covenant statement. We began to change our church culture around how we treated our newcomers by making name tags for our visitors, using the guest registry to track their visits, and by writing newsletter articles encouraging all JUCers to talk with our visitors. The Membership Committee and Board of Trustees led the way, but over time, our members began to learn how much fun it was to talk with the interesting people who come to us. When we first began our Path to Membership classes we felt awkward when talking about money, but we got used to it, and now we talk about it matter-of-factly. Prospective members expect to make financial contributions and are grateful for clear information. The Foundations of Fellowship program was seen very quickly to solve knotty problems that had persisted for years in lining up each week's support volunteers, and though some long time members still do not participate, almost all of our new members are happy to know they are helping out in a real way while becoming familiar with the ministry programs.

The specific circumstances of each church will affect how the programs presented in this workshop might be applied, so such applications will vary. But the basic concepts are widely applicable. The owning of the mission and shared ministry by the congregation is critical, and it is important for the people who are leading the way in the cultural change to be persistent without being preachy. Taking the long view and understanding institutional dynamics can help avert frustration on the part of those who wish the change could come quickly. Compassion for individual circumstances serves as an excellent balance for high expectations, as is a high comfort level on the part of those who communicate the expectations.

The documents related to the programs at JUC are available on our web site at jeffersonunitarian.org. They may be adopted as is, with appropriate changes in the names, locations or systems particular to each church, by those who feel they will serve their church. They may be adapted in any way that makes them better fit the circumstances at their church. These could be minor changes. For instance, a church that doesn't have a web site (yet) would want to delete the reference to such a site on the Guest Registry. Or they could be significant changes. For instance, a small church might consider making all of the tasks covered by the Foundations of Fellowship be performed by rotating teams of five to ten people who share a particular task. In that case, all able members would choose which rotating team they would be a part of for a church year, and they might serve alone or with a partner to do their task one Sunday per month.

Keep your eye on the prize with patience and love. It will take three to five years of laying the ground work of the cultural shifts before you are likely to see much in the way of tangible results. If your church has already begun the cultural changes, but has not yet implemented intentional programs to better integrate new members and coordinate your volunteers, we at JUC hope that you will benefit from these ideas. We will continue to develop new programs, so keep an eye on our web site.