

September 29, 2018

Dear Greater Philly UU Cluster community,

As many of you may know, in the fall of 2013, Reverend Dr. Richard Speck (Joseph Priestley District Executive Director at the time) and Marilyn Huff (member of UUC Delaware County) convened a cluster interest meeting to explore the possibility of re-forming a Greater Philly Cluster of Congregations. The response was positive, so Marilyn moved forward to facilitate subsequent meetings to help us create the Cluster.

Two years later, in the fall of 2015, Marilyn announced that she was no longer going to continue in her role. Despite her best efforts, no one had volunteered to help run the Cluster. At the same time, on a national level, regionalization was occurring. 5 regions were developed, and within each region, congregations were organized into Clusters. There are 23 Clusters in the Central East Region, of which the Greater Philly Cluster is one.

As I had attended most meetings and believed in the value of the Cluster, I did not want to see the Cluster become inactive. So I contacted Marilyn, Pat Infante (the new Central East Region primary contact) and Felice (member from UF Lower Bucks) to see if we could develop a leadership team to continue the work of the Cluster. They agreed, and with their support, I volunteered to chair the group.

When I took on this role, I had three core beliefs that helped guide me. First, I believed that one of the things that is needed to make a successful Cluster is to shift the culture of the congregations away from isolation, and that that shift would take time. Congregations are used to working on their own. I believed it would take a while for the congregations to see how they could benefit if they come together on activities. Thus, I internally told myself that unless unexpected circumstances arose, I'd commit five years to helping organize and grow the Cluster. At the five year mark, I'd reevaluate my involvement. Well, this meeting begins my third year.

My second core belief was that congregations need to see and experience the benefit of coming together on activities before they'd be willing to commit to more sustained involvement. They'd need to be convinced of what the Cluster could provide. So I created a vision each year for the Cluster, which included the activities that I was willing to make happen each year. Activities involved communication/advertising, community building, denominational affairs, education/trainings, social justice, and more recently music. More specifically, I've facilitated 4 meetings a year, organized two trainings a year, provided regular content to the Cluster website, sent monthly email announcements to members and communication contacts at each congregation, more recently created a Facebook page and group, which I post content to, among many other things that I've done. I'd like to believe that my efforts have not been in vain. That people are starting to see the value in coming together as a UU community.

The third core belief I had to help guide me was - for the Cluster to be sustainable, there needs to be consistent involvement of the congregations. Now this is where it gets tricky. This is the point that triggers all sorts of red flags for ministers, staff and congregation members. It taps into a deep-seated belief that most congregations have - the belief of scarcity. They don't have enough money. They don't have enough staff or volunteers or space or any number of things. So when I talk about the Cluster, immediately people become protective - the assumption is that any Cluster work would be asking for resources that take away from their congregation. This is a tough and deep-seated view to shift. It is true that involvement will require resources (space, time, volunteers, etc). However, the resources aren't in isolation. The Cluster will allow us to pool some of our resources, so individual churches don't have to come up with all of the resources to do the same things. There are some

things (not everything) that churches do individually that if they came together to do - they'd save time, energy, resources and money - and have a greater impact. To me, that is the purpose of the Cluster. Congregations benefit when they come together - work together and share their strengths. There are many things that congregations do best in their own church - caring committees, worship services, community building events, etc. I'm not referring to those things. I'm talking about the things that congregations can benefit from by coming together - advertising UUism, improving our use of social media, participating in regional and denominational events, providing trainings, and organizing social justice efforts. These efforts will help us grow our faith, our congregations, and our own spiritual selves. Many of our congregations are doing these things in isolation - expending much needed resources and often reinventing the wheel. Everyone has to be their own expert on everything. The Cluster brings 14 congregations together, so none of the congregations have to find the money, volunteers, space, to do all of these things on their own.

So to reiterate - I believe that a cultural shift toward working together is needed. That this shift will take time. Thus I internally committed to five years to help grow the Cluster. I've spent the past two years trying to demonstrate the value of coming together and will continue this year in the same way. However, if the Cluster is going to be sustainable, the 14 congregations need to get more involved. I can't continue this work alone. Thus, I propose to organize a Summit of the 14 congregations in October 2019 to brainstorm and discuss ways that we can spend the remaining two years developing an infrastructure to help continue the work of the Cluster. However, before we can have a Summit, I need your help.

During this church year (2018-2019), I am asking for the 14 GPC congregations to:

- 1) Disseminate this message to your ministers, Board members, and congregation members
- 2) Get people talking about the Cluster and really flesh out whether your congregation wants to participate in the Cluster or not. If it does, what are your congregation's strengths that can be added to the pool of resources to continue the work of the Cluster?

Now, it is possible that some or all of the congregations may decide that they don't want to participate in the Cluster. That's okay. Maybe this isn't the right time for an active Cluster. I'd rather know now to save me another two years of time, energy, and emotional investment.

- 3) Get the commitment of your congregation's key stakeholders (minister, Board members, and anyone else) to participate in the Summit in October 2019 to discuss how we can do this work together. The key stakeholders are needed, if the Cluster is to be sustainable.

I sincerely believe that we are stronger together. As a group of vibrant UU congregations, we can continue to grow our faith, our congregations, our own spiritual selves, and our positive impact in the larger community.

Thank you for your consideration and support. I look forward to another great year of connection, fellowship and positive impact for the greater good.

With deep respect,

Amy Nothelfer  
Volunteer GPC Chair