

2026-2030 FUSIT Strategic Plan

Introduction

The Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) is pleased to present the 2025-2030 Strategic Plan for the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca (FUSIT), a five-year plan laying a path towards achievement of FUSIT's goals.

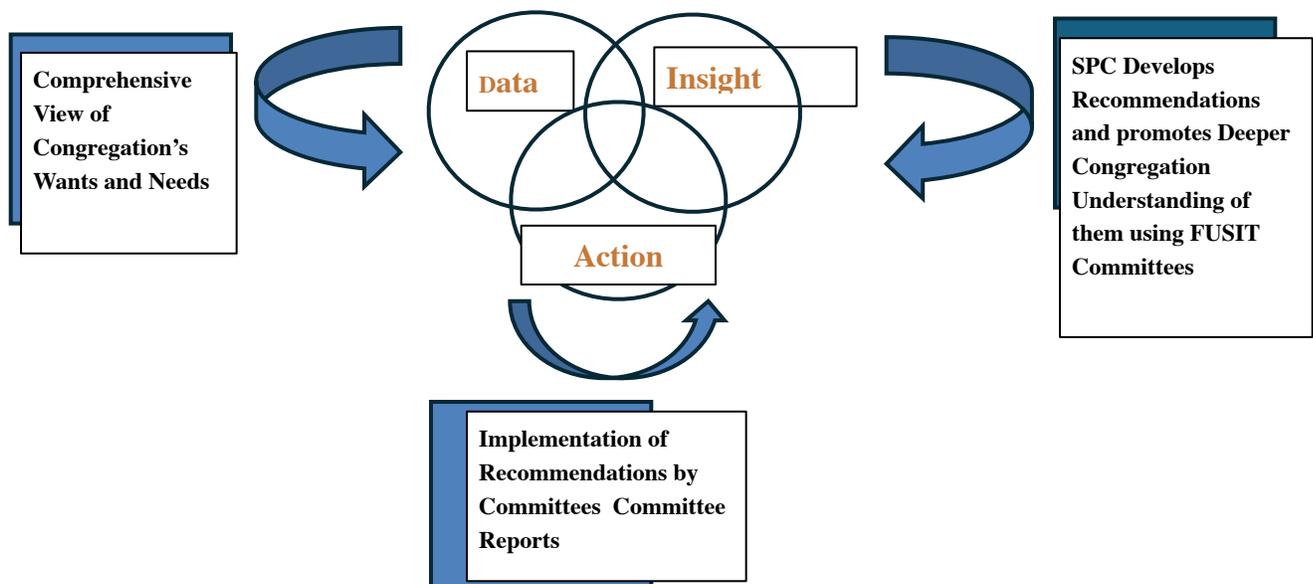
Our Charge

The Strategic Planning Committee (SPC) is an ad hoc committee created and charged by the Board of Trustees with producing a viable plan to serve as a compass for FUSIT's vision and ministry for the next three to five years.

Reasons for a Strategic Plan

A strategic plan is an important framework for an organization because it provides a clear vision, helps leaders make better decisions, and aligns the entire organization toward achieving its long term goals. It moves an organization from being reactive to being proactive and forward-focused.

The Role of the Strategic Planning Committee at FUSIT



Methodology

SPC has attempted to clarify FUSIT's most important goals based on input from the congregation so the organization can focus its attention and resources and achieve meaningful results over time. Our efforts build on the work the "DreamCatchers" initiated in 2019, which was interrupted by and subsequently discontinued due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

SPC began its work by reviewing approaches and data collected from the DreamCatchers. (Appendix) Our committee then looked at published trends in our local community and the Ithaca downtown area, including demographic shifts and public transport. (See Appendix) We also analyzed and discussed Strategic Plans of six other religious and spiritual organizations around the country. (Appendix) In an effort to specifically garner information from a like-sized and minded UU congregation, the Boulder, Colorado UU congregation was contacted regarding their approach to strategic planning and membership pathway. (Appendix)

In an effort to further appreciate the nature of strategic planning for religious/spiritual organizations, SPC referred to sections of the book, Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as a Spiritual Practice for Congregations, by Gill Rendle and Alice Mann. (Appendix) This resource informs the reader on how to engage a congregation to produce a strategic plan representative of a congregation as a whole and was our chief reference source.

In an attempt to reduce redundancy in data collection we examined previously collected data points, such as those collected from responses to prior Open Questions and from Reverend Lydia's survey of the congregation about stewardship efforts. These data points were built into a SWOT Analysis presented to the congregation, to which the congregation could then add thoughts via sticky notes.

A few weeks later a survey with the following three questions generated by the Strategic Planning Committee and approved by the Board of Trustees was distributed to the congregation:

1. How would you describe FUSIT to someone new to the Ithaca community?
2. What prompts (or would prompt) you to hold membership in FUSIT? Explain what the leadership could do to enhance the experience.
3. List 1-3 goals you would like to see in FUSIT's plan for the next 3-5 years.

Survey questions were posted to the congregation in a few ways: listed in the order of service, appeared on the overhead screen during service, and bulk emailed via the Breeze List-Serve. Announcements requesting responses were made during two services. Congregants were able to return completed responses to these questions by email to our designated committee member, deposit them in a dedicated collection box in the parlor following services, or mail them in. Included was the opportunity for confidential responses. All responses were collected and put through a word cloud program. Themes were also hand categorized and sorted. In preparing our recommendations, SPC chose to focus on the top five themes of congregational responses.

Responses

SWOT Board Summary

Strengths

Community
RE Programming
Administrative Staff
Lay Leaders
Long history in current community/location
Resilience
Strong and varied programs
Our physical space and location

Weaknesses

Membership
Resources
Volunteer base
Aging population
Money talk
Diversity within our congregation
Collaboration w other area faith organizations
Activities which engage and offer connection

Opportunities

Expand stewardship
Downtown location
Our physical space
Social Justice Programs
Volunteerism is up in the U.S.
Local population increasing
Americans are seeking community and purpose
Money Talk
Collaboration w other area faith organizations
Activities which engage and offer means for connection

Challenges

Aging population
Decrease of available time
Money Talk

SOURCE

Rev. Lydia's Survey
Rev. Lydia's Survey
Rev. Lydia's Survey
Rev. Lydia's Survey
History of FUSIT
Dreamcatcher survey
Dreamcatcher survey
Dreamcatcher survey

Rev. Lydia's survey
Rev. Lydia's survey
Rev. Lydia's survey
Rev. Lydia's survey
Rev. Lydia's survey
2023 Winter O.Q.
2023 Winter O.Q.
2023 Fall O.Q.

Rev. Lydia's survey
Rev Lydia's survey
Rev. Lydias'a survey
Rev. Lydia's survey
2024 News article
2025 News article
2025 News article
Rev. Lydia's survey
2023 Winter O.Q.
2023 Fall O.Q.

Rev Lydia's survey
2023 + 2024 O.Q.
Rev. Lydia's survey

Top dozen responses with number indicating number of respondents expressing each:

- 23: Use the words “spiritual/spirituality” describing FUSIT
- 11: Consider our congregation “welcoming” (though the intent of this word seemed to vary)
- 9: Value our work for social justice in the community
- 7: Need to create financial stability/live within our means
- 7: Use the word “principles” in describing FUSIT
- 7: People expressing that they specifically enjoy the sermons
- 6: Like and want the current variety of speakers
- 5: Want to partner with other Ithaca religious and social justice organizations
- 4: FUSIT has many volunteer opportunities
- 4: Continue to grow child RE program
- 4: Increase rentals
- 4: Increase racial diversity

Observations and thoughts from SPC:

- We had no responses explicitly related to LGBTQ+ concerns.
- We still have at least a few people who objectify racial diversity. The socioeconomic and racial makeup of a congregation reflects the social and work lives of the membership.
- People deeply value our community, sermons, and Religious Education (RE). At the same time, some expressed a desire for sermons with greater depth.
- Leadership is appreciated, yet the need for education on the authority structuring of our Partnership Governance persists. Enhancing communication through regular congregational reporting and increased visibility of group membership continues to represent a challenge as congregational conversations are increasingly poorly attended. Partnering teams should consider regular (several times per year) communication with the congregation and try different channels which may connect to different audiences.
- Increase adult programming, including the 20-40 range, at times that people can attend.
- Include a structured educational pathway into membership, including clearly stated expectations around participation and financial support when signing the membership book.
- More interfaith projects, some ongoing, and regular summer services with childcare also suggested.
- Our congregation has many ideas about how to improve our programming and outreach; investments of time and funds are needed to make this happen.
- Anyone can start a new group by contacting our office.
- A modest increase—about 10%—in pledges across the congregation would secure our financial health.
- It’s clear that support for FUSIT overall is strong, that a subgroup would like us to move toward services that are more intellectually challenging, that folks really like our RE program but prefer less RE in the services, that many would like a landed minister (without necessarily understanding our current fiscal constraints), that we still struggle with a lack of diversity among our congregation, and that some folks would like FUSIT to be more socially active.

Recommendations

SPC recommends the following specific goals to be delegated to the FUSIT Committees listed below for implementation. Each Committee carries the agency to establish its own committee structure, regular meetings, specific action steps, tasks, and timelines to ensure progress towards the recommended goals. Committees will provide an annual report indicating progress made and setbacks encountered (if any) towards achievement of these goals and be reviewed by BoT.

Our Strategic Plan should be considered dynamic rather than fixed, open to revision when needed. However, any proposed modifications should include thoughtful discussion between the BoT and the relevant committee(s) and any significant changes presented for congregational conversation.

| Committees/ Teams | Goals |
|--|--|
| Services: MVT, Celebrations and Music Teams | <p>Move toward services that are more intellectually challenging. Sunday services should focus on topics relevant to current challenges congregants are facing. Need for greater spiritual/spirituality and creed to guide actions. Continue to engage with other faith traditions and continue to invite guests to present various viewpoints from the pulpit. Regular conversations between the Celebrations Team and the congregation to gain the pulse and help this team find relevant topics.</p> <p>Music varied and appropriate to the service with goal of deepening congregational engagement. Some would like return of more traditional hymns.</p> |
| Finance Committee/ Stewardship/ Development | <p>Address fiscal constraints, strengthen and expand various giving programs. Expand the stewardship team; promote ways for members to put FUSIT in their will or as beneficiary of retirement accounts; be more explicit about the need for members to provide financial commitments. Educate and engage congregation in matters of our fiscal realities. Promote various fundraising ventures. Identify possible granting sources to address both infrastructure needs and new programmatic efforts.</p> |
| Membership/ Outreach/ Development | <p>Expand outreach, engagement, and membership. Include a path to membership and continued connection, address retention. Include an educational component addressing UU values and membership expectations. Increase social activities. Explore how expressed desires for more social justice programming and a more diverse and engaged congregation might be achieved through marketing, volunteer engagement and changes to programming.</p> |
| Religious Education: MVT and RE Staff | <p>Build on our successful RE program with more programming for adults, including young adults aged 20-30. Include education in world religions (including traditional religions of western culture) and the intersection of religion, culture, and world events. Increasing RE volunteerism is a necessary prelude to increasing RE programming.</p> |

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| Social Justice | Increase the social justice presence at FUSIT and establish more interfaith social justice projects. Establish a long-term visible program or partnership that exemplifies one or more UUA core values and fills a need in Tompkins County. Increase engagement with ACT. |
| OAT, Buildings and Grounds | Address call to use building differently in order to increase income through additional rentals, to provide a housing option, and to seek ways to save on building maintenance and utilities when feasible. |

Conclusions

Across all sources of feedback—open-ended questions, Rev. Lydia’s survey, the posted SWOT board, and our three-question response survey—there is unmistakable, strong support for FUSIT. This support is expressed through financial giving, creative ideas, questions and concerns, and enthusiasm for new programming.

While this overall support is robust, several needs and priorities consistently emerged. Congregants want FUSIT to expand, be financially secure, value connection and social justice, and would like to grow as a beacon in our community through our UU values. At the same time, increasing budgetary pressures challenge our ability to expand.

These challenges are surmountable if FUSIT and its members commit to continuing FUSIT’s history as an Agent of Change. By focusing on the six recommended areas and grounding our decisions in data-informed strategic planning, we can move forward in a way that honors our congregation’s values and aspirations.

2.15.2026 Respectfully submitted by the 2025/26 Strategic Planning Committee:

Susan Salton, Don Rakow, Sara Catterall, Marie McRae, Rene Rogers