

# UUAA Congregational Vision



**A Report to the First Unitarian Universalist  
Congregation of Ann Arbor  
From the Vision 20/50 Leadership Team  
May of 2020**

## Revision history

April 14, 2020	Rev 1.1	Rough draft of full document for review by Leadership Team chairs.
April 15, 2020	Rev 1.4	First full revision for review by the Vision 20/50 Leadership Team. Ed Lynn, Laura Johnstone, Sandy Simon, based on Ed Lynn's original draft
April 18, 2020	Rev 2.0	Incorporated feedback from Leadership Team and Elandria; Removed Mission, Vision, Purpose since not finalized yet.
April 26, 2020	Rev. 2.1	Incorporate feedback from Rev Manish, Rev Cassi, Rev Lindasusan,, Board & Leadership Team members. Add illustration.
April 27, 2020	Rev 3.0	Edits thorough out doc

## Vision Summary

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This document presents a distillation of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor congregation's aspirations for our future, expressed during months of input from over 300 people. Congregants were asked to provide guidance on how to set UUAA priorities so that we can put our resources, including our energy, money, and our buildings and grounds, to the best possible use as we strive to live our UU values out loud.

**Vision Work Priorities:** After much analysis and reflection on the collected data, three intersecting critical issues emerged. All three generate considerable excitement during congregant discussions. All three fit well with the congregation's past work and current aspirations and strengths:

- **Climate justice work**
- **Anti-racism and anti-oppression work**
- **Radical welcome work**

In all three of these large issues, we have work to do within our own congregation and in the larger world.

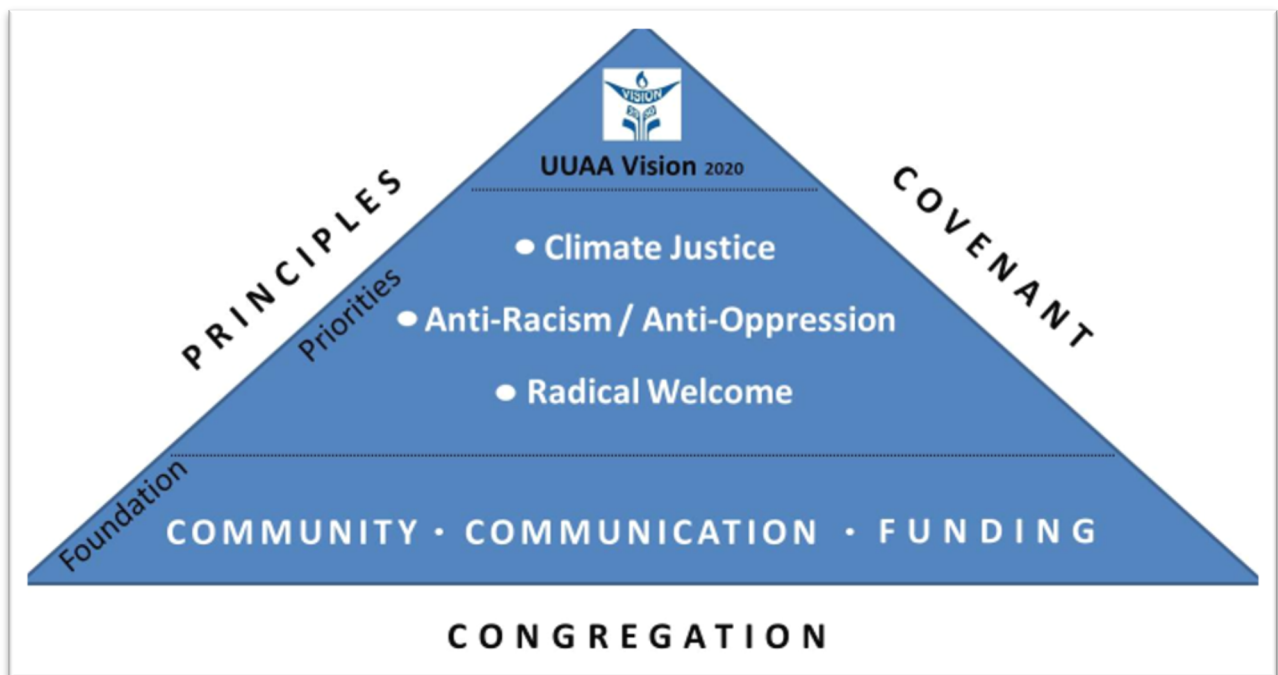
A focus on Climate Justice differentiates UUAA and builds upon our existing strengths and passions. We are uniquely positioned to take on this role as a religious voice in a complex issue with competing values. We are also called to put deeper and more impactful work toward racial justice, addressing racism and other "isms" that divide our communities and our country. As we strive to create a more sustainable Earth and society, so we will labor for a more sustainable UUAA community with radical welcome and support for all races, gender identification, ages and other identities.

**Foundation Work Priorities:** The congregation's visioning efforts brought to the surface aspects of our community that require attention. Three of these areas, which provide the "underpinnings" for our vision, need attention regardless of what vision goals we want to pursue:

- **Strengthening our beloved community**
- **Strengthening our financial stability**
- **Strengthening our communications**

This foundation work needs to happen in parallel with our vision work so that we maintain a strong and resilient community capable of leading change.

First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor  
**Grounded in love, committed to sustainability and justice within our community and beyond.**



This congregation has a history of facing the moral and ethical challenges of our times, and our vision calls for us to focus our resources and rise to the occasion again. Our world needs healing! Our vision is built on the strength of our UUAA congregation and its institutional foundations, and informed by our Unitarian Universalist Principles and our covenant with each other.

## Introduction

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### The Vision 20/50 Project

In August of 2018, The First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor (UUAA) called a new Senior Minister, at a time when the congregational leadership and staff sensed UUAA was ready to take a new look at our identity and bring clarity to the many diverse programs in our vibrant community. There was a consensus that we could be doing more if we had a better focus to our efforts. In response to this need for new vision, the Board of Trustees (Board) created the Vision 20/50 Project, and charged them to engage deeply with the congregation and imagine what UUAA could be in the year 2050. What kind of congregation would our children, and their children, see? How could we bring sharper focus and impact to our many wonderful activities and powerful social justice groups? With a crisper view of our place in the world, we might have more sense of purpose and more impact on ourselves, our community and our denomination.

Elandria Williams, leadership consultant and co-moderator of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), was engaged to lead us through the visioning process and help our congregation create a process for ongoing congregational involvement in visioning and focused action planning. With the intent to make this process a model for other UU congregations, two regional UU leaders, Rev. Lisa Presley and Rev. Carlton Smith, joined the project to observe and advise.

### Process

During the Fall and Winter of 2019, the Vision 20/50 Leadership held a series of small-group visioning sessions with members of the congregation of all ages. There were additional sessions for staff and community partner groups (Alpha House, Habitat for Humanity, etc.). The large amount of input reflected the diversity and richness of the congregation. The hopes, ideas and priorities expressed by the congregation were synthesized into a Theory of Change document that encapsulates UUAA's key values, unique strengths, greatest challenges, and a set of heartfelt issues the congregation wants to engage.

A Vision 20/50 Report, documenting the events, processes, data analysis and lessons learned along the way, will be provided to the Board of Trustees and made available on the UUAA website. It will include a description of how the Theory of Change was created as well as the process used for prioritizing issues.

This Congregational Vision document, on the other hand, describes the UUAA Vision that has emerged from the Vision 20/50 efforts, and contains suggested activities that could address the congregation's priority issues.

With the Vision 20/50 Report and the Congregational Vision document, the Board of Trustees move the congregation forward into an Action Planning process, through which the congregation will develop detailed and measurable goals for living into their vision.

## History of Activism

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This congregation has a proud history of confronting the issues of our times since 1865 when our congregation was established on the heels of the Civil War and the bitter divide in the country over slavery. One of our founders was a conductor on the underground railroad in Michigan. Early congregants worked with the predecessor of the Red Cross, helped create libraries, and fought for women's rights. More recently we have supported marriage equality and immigrants' rights, helped house the homeless, and have made progress on "greening" our building with solar panels and the wind turbine we refer to as our "steeple".

When we celebrated our 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2014-15, Rev William F. Schulz, [UUA](#) President (1985-93); [UUSC](#) President (2010-2016) wrote this tribute:

*"My recent visit to Ann Arbor reminded me once again what a vibrant, path-breaking congregation yours is. As you survey your 150 years, you will, I'm sure, find one instance after another of those traits. Because I did my doctoral dissertation on the writing of the first Humanist Manifesto of 1933, I think in particular of the role your church played ... in the development of a movement, humanism, that changed not only Unitarianism but American life. Each one of my three or four opportunities to be in your pulpit over the past thirty-five years have confirmed the impression of your vitality and leadership, a combination of peerless ministerial vision and numerous laypersons' skills. You are a model UU church and I am delighted to salute you on this milestone occasion."*

Our vision is to continue our work together as a "path-breaking" congregation.

## Work to Achieve Our Vision

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During our Fall/Winter vision sessions and follow-up discussions, congregants raised many strong interests that are certain to continue to inspire activities and events in our congregation in the future. The impetus for Vision 20/50, however, was the need to focus the congregation on those core issues that will help us shape the congregation and world our children and grandchildren will see in 2050.

To this end, the congregation participated in a ranking exercise with the Theory of Change document, and the project leadership engaged in considerable analysis and discernment. As a result, three intersecting priorities emerged that fit best with the congregation's hopes, aspirations and strengths:

- **Climate justice work**
- **Anti-racism and anti-oppression work**
- **Radical welcome to diverse seekers, including outreach to our youth and elders**

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These priorities have considerable overlap, and also include some of the issues that were highlighted in other areas of congregational discussions. For example, climate justice work could attract more young people – who are inheriting the climate crisis and looking for approaches and solutions – which is an aspiration captured in our Theory of Change.

Each of the three priorities speaks to actions we can take, within our congregation and outside in our community and world. Together they will be a touchstone for the full range of our diverse interest groups, ensuring we're working toward shared objectives.

Note that elevating these priorities does not mean that existing activities at UUAA will go away or be diminished. It means that UUAA groups are all invited into the big conversation – to view themselves through a new lens and perhaps expand, reframe or refocus activities and priorities to support our primary goals. It does mean that resource allocation (funds, building space, staff hours) will favor these priorities if conflicts arise.

## Climate Justice

During the congregation's extended discussions over many months, the issue raised most frequently was the need to confront the existential issue of climate change. The dominance of this issue is not surprising. If the fundamental task before the congregation is to imagine what UUAA could be and should be in the year 2050, that future will depend on the unfolding of the effects of climate change.

We have both ministerial and lay expertise in climate justice, and we have our wind turbine "steeple" to inspire us in such work. We have congregants interested in extending beyond our comfort zone – a necessity for enacting fundamental change.

There is work we need to do, within the UUAA community, and externally in joint action with other religious groups, and by partnering with community organizations. Hopes expressed in visioning sessions included the desire for UUAA to be a leader in learning about and discussing climate issues from a religious and values-based perspective. We want to be an example of sustainable living in right relationship with the natural world. We want to be a significant partner with groups that have impact in confronting injustices caused by climate changes.

### **Goal: Make our buildings and grounds carbon neutral**

#### **Actions**

- Consult with experts (university, community organizations, congregants with expertise) to create a roadmap to carbon neutrality
- Achieve recognition as a model of religious-based stewardship and sustainability as a result of our internal environmental work.
- Partner with expert groups in both learning and teaching sustainability in our congregation

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To be better stewards of our environment, we can make our facility carbon neutral or, given that it is automobile dependent, carbon negative to offset the environmental impact of access to our facility. There are many actions we can take, and a wide variety of educational and advocacy groups with whom we can work to achieve this. Our facility will be a model of environmental sustainability.

Our beautiful 46 acres of land serves as a place for ceremony, reflection, meditation and pleasure. We are stewards of this property, and we can make our land a model of sustainable stewardship. There are a number of community educational and advocacy groups with whom we can work to achieve this. Our vision is to make UUAA an acknowledged leader in this area.

**Goal: Partner with groups that make an impact in climate justice work in Michigan**

**Actions**

- Become recognized as a model of religious-based climate justice work
- Establish close relationships with appropriate partners who are making a large impact in climate justice action
- Become a visible leader in this area, for example by hosting climate action meetings for area congregations

Community engagement is very much in our congregational DNA. At present we are directly engaged in climate work through our Climate Crisis Action Team, our Mindful Eating Team and other UUAA groups. We are also engaged in social justice issues arising from the effects of climate change (e.g., the Immigration Action Committee, Challenging Racism Group).

The social justice aspects of the climate crisis are large and complex. UUAA will determine focused, impactful efforts can we make, both with direct engagement and partnered engagement. We will engage with our current partners who have opportunities to expand our involvement in areas that concern environmental issues – Habitat for Humanity, Alpha House, WICIR, Food Gatherers, etc.

The congregation envisions our green facility as both a model for values-based action and as a hub of action, with like-minded people meeting at our site for conferences, action planning, video-streamed speakers, and more. By working toward carbon neutrality in our facilities and partnering with outside groups, UUAA builds a sustainable future.

## **Anti-Racism and Anti-Oppression**

In recent years our congregation has participated in consciousness-raising workshops and activities in the realm of structural and systemic racism. Throughout the Vision 20/50 project the congregation expressed deep concern about the existence and impact of racism. This concern has been heightened by the recent rise in racist and anti-Semitic incidents, crimes against queer people, and general “othering” in our country and local communities. Such attitudes and actions are in opposition to the inherent worth and dignity of all, and they offend our other shared principles as well.

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Systemic racism and the oppression of marginalized groups are not just problems that exist “out there”. These are issues we need to examine within our denomination and our congregation. Internally at UUAA, we have work to do as we transition from a mostly white congregation to one that is increasingly diverse, a goal which was prominently voiced in the Visioning Sessions. Deeper support for and deeper relationship with non-white and non-cisgendered congregants is required if we are to become a radically welcoming congregation.

Many race issues intersect with climate issues as climate disruption exacerbates our societal divisions. The current pandemic is having much greater impact on communities of color, just as environmental disasters do. Locally, the COVID-19 crisis has spotlighted glaring racial inequities in access to healthcare. Climate disruption leads to more climate refugees, adding to the unfair treatment of migrants, especially migrants of color.

The challenge of focusing on anti-racism and anti-oppression and its intersection with the climate emergency will be difficult. We will be challenged to examine our culture of mass consumption, the currently accepted income inequality, class injustice, patriarchy and white supremacy. It requires that we learn about the intersectionality of these issues and come to terms with what must be changed for a more sustainable culture to emerge.

The world needs healing, and we have much to offer.

**Goal:** To build a more diverse community where no one feels like they are “other” within our walls, and all serve as leaders, teachers and learners.

**Actions**

- Assure we have adequate staffing so that staff time is committed to overseeing supportive identity groups such as IPOC (Indigenous and People of Color) gatherings, BLUU worship, etc.
- Establish more avenues for encouraging relationship between congregants of different races, classes, backgrounds, disability status, etc.
- Provide regular leadership training and leadership opportunities for everyone, especially new members.

Our congregation has many years of work in becoming a Welcoming Congregation and striving to support people of all gender identities. Our Interweave group has helped many congregants feel at home at UUAA, integrate into the other UUAA activity groups, and serve as leaders. There are lessons we could learn from Interweave that might apply to other identity groups.

We are fortunate to have staff member Quiana Perkins throwing huge effort into creating opportunities for brown and black UUAA members to feel invested in UUAA. She finds innovative ways to bring people together and also connect black UUAA congregants with national programs through Black Lives of UU. These programs need to grow and continue to be supported by staff and congregants.



**Goal:** To form a small number of committed partnerships with community action groups who have a high impact on fighting racism and other “isms”.

### **Actions**

- Form relationships with UU denominational groups doing diversity work.
- Determine appropriate partners in the community where we could form relationships that would help make a large impact in anti-racism work

The Challenging Racism Group and Immigration Action Group both do a good job of alerting congregants about opportunities to petition, attend rallies and lectures and in other ways get involved in community action. Our impact will be magnified by joining with specific organizations already active in these areas.

We might expand our involvement with current social justice community partners and/or develop a new relationship with a community organization that we feel is in alignment with our mission.

We might partner with a school or community center that asks for our support, providing tutoring and mentoring, donating supplies, and being a resource for teachers and parents.

By establishing an Action Team for justice issues, our congregation could be alert to opportunities for immediate action within our community and react swiftly

### **Radical Welcome**

The conversations and feedback of our Visioning Sessions revealed strong feelings for the UUAA community and underscored the importance of nurturing our community. We value our covenant to dwell together in peace, search for truth in love and to help one another.

There is no color, ethnic, age specific, or economic strata precluded by our principles or our covenant. In fact, our principles and covenant can serve as a common basis for a completely diverse group of people who value the dignity and worth of every person and are committed to actions that bring about a more just and loving world.

The Visioning Sessions also revealed a strong desire to create a more diverse congregation, one that better reflects the communities in which we live. We have made progress in that LGBTQ members are valued members and leaders of our congregation. We need to expand to many more areas of diversity, including people of, color, diverse economic means, age and ethnicity.

The Vision Sessions feedback included many comments about the need to expand our integration and inclusion of youth and elders, with greater support for their specific needs.

**Goal:** To become a community where people of many backgrounds, races, ages and abilities can feel not just comfortable but in meaningful covenantal relationship with others in the congregation.

## **Actions**

- Identify methods for conflict resolution, and teach our community how to deal with conflict in direct, constructive ways
- Continuously offer insightful programs, lectures, and group study to increase our understanding of each other
- Create or expand identity groups that support diversity (for example, the current People of Color (POC) lunches and Black Lives of UU (BLUU) worship gatherings)
- Form a task force to review our website, communication materials, building decorations, etc. to assure we reflect a welcoming environment to everyone, including people of marginalized identities
- Create programs and “marketing” materials to grow awareness of UUAA in a wide range of communities, perhaps targeting a specific community each year
- Make recommendations to the Worship Team for inspiring service content that comes from traditionally marginalized voices.
- Create a congregant buddy system

Our congregation clearly and consistently has expressed a desire for more racial diversity. In recent years we have taken steps to examine our own relationship to race, and to establish groups that support and celebrate the experiences of black and brown UUs.

Many of our policies and practices were established decades ago, when the idea of structural racism had yet to be recognized. In what ways do our UUAA practices center whiteness? What does our congregation and church look like to visitors of color? Where are the divides and how can we bridge them? By examining ourselves, being open to criticism as well as praise, by honoring all voices and challenging long-held practices, we build the beloved community where all can say, “I belong here.”

**Goal:** Congregants of all ages and abilities feel welcomed and supported at UUAA.

### **Actions**

- Provide new opportunities for collaboration and interaction between all ages
- Intentionally integrate YRUU age participants in congregational meetings and other events. Take important conversations to youth for discussion
- Specific speakers and programming for elders
- Establish ways to show gratitude and recognition to youth and seniors, ensuring they are listened to and know they are valued
- Incorporate remote access to meetings and events as a standard practice, to accommodate mobility issues and include out of towners

Some of the challenge of integrating the full range of ages in our community is a matter of culture shift. More focus on the needs of our younger and older members is needed. For example, when planning meetings and events, extending an invitation to our youth and elders must become a regular practice. This may be simple, by just remembering to ask, or more challenging, such as providing remote access or transportation services. Finding more opportunities to recognize and celebrate their gifts and their contributions to our community will increase not only their sense of being valued, it will raise the consciousness of all to how valuable they are.

The congregation expressed a desire for more and better inter-generational connections. An inter-generational buddy system could, for example, create bonds between young families whose grandparents may be thousands of miles away with our local elders to form “intentional family” connections. All of our generations will be nourished by these bonds.

Post-graduation events for college age youth could be held during the summer or during winter vacations, as UUAA once did, so that “alums” from our youth programs could maintain their connections. A designated fund could be created to fund rides for people with transportation limitations and thereby help them participate in services and groups. Our new-found proficiencies with remote meeting technology, learned during the Covid-19 “shelter in place” orders, can be leveraged to provide more remote access to services and meetings. It is through such programs and practices – and the connections they nurture – that our congregation becomes the beloved community.

## Foundational Work to Support Our Vision

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When the Vision 20/50 Leadership Team, staff and Board reviewed the priorities that emerged from the vision work, some of the input from the congregation highlighted a need for work on foundational areas. To do our best work in any aspect of our vision we must strengthen the basic needs of our organization. We need to expand our work on:

- **Strengthening our beloved community**
- **Strengthening our financial stability**
- **Strengthening our communications**

These are areas that need to be addressed through creative engagement between staff and congregational leadership.

### Strengthening our beloved community

Because we interact on a covenantal, rather than creedal, basis, we must continually pay attention to the health of our community. This is particularly important given the spiritual diversity of the community, which will be further enriched when we deeply engage in Radical Welcome.

**Goal:** To augment the “touchpoints” among the congregational members and friends in order to highlight and strengthen all that brings us together, even while honoring all that makes each of us unique.

### Actions

- Expand the reach of our community. through streaming our Sunday Services.
- Engage in creative electronic outreach and connection, such as video conferenced meals – virtual round robin dinners
- Provide opportunities to learn more about and engage in a range of spiritual practices
- Institute a “Q Buddy” system of making phone calls to people who are isolated.
- Honor our long-time members on a regular basis

UUAA has many opportunities to extend our reach through online services, such as streaming our Sunday Services. This need has been driven home with the recent Covid-19 experience. One fortunate outcome of this difficult time is the increased comfort and capability with remote technologies among our leadership and congregation. By leveraging these and other technologies, we are able to increase the reach and effectiveness of our programs and pastoral care.

## **Strengthening our financial sustainability**

Although we have made significant progress in this area in the last five years, there is much more to do to make sure our finances are sound and that we have planned for the future.

**Goal:** Increase the congregation's collective/covenantal mindset, to move from a transactional mindset ("I donate to get this or that") to a community where people are "investing" in the values of what the congregation provides.

### **Actions**

- Expand the Stewardship Team from a group to everyone in the congregation.
- Increase opportunities for people to share their stories of stewardship, and how these stories changed them.
- Combine stewardship holistically with communications (see below) so that the stories written about our investments in our values are widely known.

In order to better connection our financial contributions to the work of the congregation, we will promote the concept that jointly we are all stewards of this congregation because of its values and the people who join with us on this journey.

**Goal:** Assure that the congregation's finances are strong enough so that we thrive, and more than that, have the resources to achieve our aspirational goals.

### **Actions**

- Expand our giving patterns and opportunities. We are basically a cash, check and credit card operation, based on physicals. We need to move to a more cashless operation with electronic transfers at the center.
- Upgrade our annual stewardship operation. Explore evergreen, multi-year pledging, with increased canvassing and personal conversations.
- Continue our work giving increased prominence to the Sunderland Society to promote bequests.

**Goal:** Continue improving our UUAA operations

### **Actions**

- Update our present financial system from a patchwork system to an integrated financial management system.
- Continue the development of a consistent and accessible set of operational policies to provide clear guidance and define responsibilities.

## Strengthening our Communications

We have many venues of communication within the congregation, but we share a frustration with every congregation and institution in the country in that many people still feel they are not fully informed. We need better defined responsibilities, good knowledge of best practices, and adequate technology and resources to keep up with modern communications.

**Goal:** Create an overall communications strategy, with defined roles and responsibilities; Assure that the necessary people/ financial/ equipment resources are available to implement this strategy.

### Actions

- Identify staff or create a communications committee that can evaluate and coordinate our communications effort, including guidelines for social media, an up-to-date design for our website and policies for using Zoom and other communications tools.
- Take the lead in establishing a forum for local non-profit groups to interact with each other. We learned during our information gathering that there is no local venue for non-profit groups engaged in social justice work to gather and help each other.

## Closing Words

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The vision that emerged from our year of questioning and deliberation puts UUAA's primary focus on the three intersecting issues of Climate Justice, Anti-Racism/ Anti-Oppression, and Radical Welcome.

The existential issue for this generation is climate change. We are called to respond, with a religious perspective, to the broad-reaching social justice issues that climate change creates in our community and our world.

A focus on Climate Justice differentiates UUAA, building on our congregation's strengths and passions. We are uniquely positioned to take on this role. We are called to learn all we can; we are called to seek new ways of being in relationship with our natural world; we are called to serve justice.

We are also ready to put more focused and impactful work into ending racism and all "isms" within our own UUAA community and in Southeast Michigan.

As we work for a more sustainable Earth, we need to work for a more sustainable UUAA community by embracing radical welcome and support for all races, gender identification, ages and other identities.

We have a long history of social action and involvement in environmental issues, and the congregational vision described here builds on that foundation. We have a history of community engagement, and it is time to step up again.

Our world needs healing. We are ready to come together in community to respond.