

We came together in groups, we came together one-on-one. We came together in the sanctuary, the church yard, the congregation hall, the Isles of Shoals steamship pier, the front porch of the Oceanic Hotel, and in the Star Island Chapel. We even came together separately, worshipping simultaneously in Portsmouth and on Star Island. We talked, shared, dreamed, and forged the first pieces of the vision and actions that will carry us into the future.

It was SAIL weekend that brought us together for these three days of fellowship, visioning, planning for the future and making peace with our past. More than 200 South Church members and youth participated in SAIL (Sensational search; Appreciative adventure; Island ingenuity; Laugh often, love much), which was the culmination of the Transition Team's and Rev. Elaine's efforts to help us become the community of faith we want to be. The Search Committee also helped facilitate the weekend's programs as a way to deepen its understanding of what kind of minister the church needs as it takes on the task of carrying South Church's interim period through its next stage.

Scenes from a night of Appreciative Inquiry

SAIL weekend exercises were based on Rev. Elaine's "appreciative inquiry," which is a simple, effective tool for learning and change. By focusing on the best, most valuable narratives and qualities at South Church, the exercise allowed us to create hopeful images of our future. For the congregation, it began on Friday night, when participants gathered at the church for one-on-one discussion and to vote on priorities identified during the many conversations held over the past year and the voices we heard at the cottage meetings.

Anyone walking past the church on that perfect summer night would have seen the building lit up like a pinball machine while people talked on the front steps, between the columns, and around the church yard. Inside, more pairs talked in the pews, the choir loft, and around the chancel. Adults and youth first paired off, picked spots, then spent an hour listening to each other



respond to three

questions about themselves and their relationship to South Church. Rev. Elaine instructed everyone to pick a partner they didn't know well, and walking around the church you could see everything from teens with sixtysomethings to newcomers with 20-year veterans. There were people who came back to South Church after being away, and others contemplating a return. The goal of the one-on-one sessions was to listen to one another, to build deeper community ties, express our wishes and dreams for South Church's future, and to tap into the underlying "life force" that keeps us together.

After the one-on-one session, the 80-plus participants filed down to the Ladies' Parlor to vote on and prioritize the big issues revealed by our "narratives":

- searching for and welcoming a new minister,
- being a community, a family, a place to belong,
- building a religious education program that celebrates youth and integrates them into church life,
- making peace with our past,
- building transparent communications,
- reconnecting with the Unitarian Universalist Association of congregations,

- living our faith and values in a wider community,
- gaining financial security, and
- maintaining a welcoming, well-cared-for space for worship and community gatherings.

Rev. Elaine, the Transition and Search teams used the voting results to help organize Saturday's events.

Star Island scenes

SAIL weekend continued the next day on Star Island. Almost 150 adults and youth met at the steamship dock for the 6:15 a.m. ferry under the watchful eye of prime mover Lauren Katz of the Transition Team. The air was autumn-clear as we chugged out to the Isles of Shoals on sapphire-blue water under cloudless skies. By the time we glided into Gosport Harbor, the temperature was on its way into the low eighties and a steady sea breeze brushed over the island. If you accept the weather as a harbinger, there were only good things ahead that day.

We started with another session of one-on-one appreciative inquiry, and then moved to the issues voted on the previous night. Facilitators held up signs on the front lawn with each issue printed on it, and everyone chose the issue they wanted to work on. As our youth ducked under a parachute and beaned each other with water sponges on the front lawn of the Oceanic Hotel, the adults worked in groups on the porch, the lawn and in meeting rooms.



The group work yielded 10 "vision statements" and handful of art projects that were created in silence and rendered with varying degrees of artistic skill. In those well-chosen vision statements and thoughtfully conceived objects d'art, we expressed our dreams for our collective future and, perhaps more important, how to make them happen. Rev. Elaine led youth and adults in a closing prayer and song, and then the

overnight contingent saw the 'day crew' back to the Thomas Lighthouse for the trip back to Portsmouth.

Those who remained on Star Island were treated to historical walking tours, exploring the granite shorelines, a dip in the harbor, or just some quiet downtime in a rocking chair on the porch looking out across the harbor to Appledore and Smuttynose. The youth also quickly discovered that the friendly snack bar attendants had a generous hand with the ice cream scoop, and responded with predictable zeal.



We gathered for an afternoon pot-luck social hour before dinner. The final events of the day were a bonfire on the craggy rocks by the water and candlelight services for youth and adults in the island chapel. We each took a lantern from the front porch then walked silently up the hill to the chapel. The white walls gently reflected the light as we sat in silence, Quaker style, unless the spirit to



speak moved us. After hours of speaking and talking, everyone seemed to appreciate the meditative silence, which wasn't broken until the closing hymn.

Sunday, the day for action

The Star Island crew woke to 6:45 coffee, tea and cocoa on the front porch. At 7 a.m., John Shea led a group down to the dock for the daily “polar bear” plunge into the harbor. The youth, flaunting their faster metabolisms, outnumbered the adults, though a few hardy souls joined John in the 65-plus-degree water to represent the older crowd.

At 10:00, Betsy Tabor led services in the South Church sanctuary while Rev. Elaine, Deborah McDermott, Lance Hellman and the folk group led services at the same time in the Star Island chapel. Betsy’s theme was “turning toward each other and coming together,” and to gently facilitate the process, she hung crepe paper over some of the pews to encourage the sanctuary crowd to gather closely. About 55 mainlanders and day-trippers shared the first rows of the sanctuary. Evoking Margaret Wheatley’s “filling all of space with the messages we care about” and “turning toward” what matters, Betsy and Anne explored how a field of wholeness takes shape through listening, quilting, and seeing the gifts of the past. Day-trippers shared art and vision statements, and everyone was invited into one-word conversations about SAIL and about Joanne’s story of seekers trying to find “the most important thing.” Thanks to June, Jo, Karen, Kari and Jim for their renditions of “May I Suggest” and One Voice, and to Terrie for finding the perfect piano postlude, “Let There Be Peace on Earth.” As that was happening, the folk group on Star Island also sang “One Voice,” and Lance spoke briefly about the song’s effect on him when he first heard it.

The mainland and island contingents met back at South Church for a delicious lunch prepared by Julie Frank and others, and began SAIL weekend’s critical wrap-up phase: creating a strategy, an action plan to help them realize the visions created on Saturday. There was an “asset mapping” exercise that helped the groups make connections between South Church’s various assets – our people, our building, our location, etc. – and wherever possible, use these to help see their vision become a reality. The groups then moved back up to the sanctuary where they shared their action plans, to much appreciative applause. As the group wound down their time together, there was just enough energy to gather in one last circle and sing a beautiful song led by Cathy Okhuysen and Becky May, “we are the boat, we are the sea”. The weekend concluded with a renewed sense of energy and commitment that we feel certain the congregation will share in as we sail into our future together.

Every week at worship, we say in unison that at South Church we “nurture spiritual growth through worship, learning and community.” We enjoyed all of those in abundance on SAIL weekend, and in the process set our congregation’s course for the future.