



Capital Campaign Feasibility Study Report

Follen Community Church
Unitarian Universalist
Lexington, Mass.

October 31, 2016

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I. Summary	2
II. Introduction	2
III. Overview	2
IV. The interview samples	3
V. Findings from the interviews	4
VI. Projecting a campaign goal	7
VII. Recommendations	9
Appendix I: Households interviewed	11
VIII. Appendix 2: Interview questions	11

I. Summary

Follen Church is in a strong position to be planning for a capital campaign. Pledging members feel good about the Follen community, its minister, and its recent growth. Some work remains to be done to clarify and focus Follen's overall growth plan and the proposed capital project, and to secure a few lead gift commitments. Once these things have been done, I recommend proceeding with a capital campaign to raise between \$1,500,000 and \$2,000,000.

II. Introduction

On March 15, 2016, Mark Metzger contacted me in behalf of Follen's Capital Campaign Exploratory Committee for suggestions about their process. After further correspondence through the spring and summer, Mark asked me to conduct a feasibility study for a capital campaign. In August, Follen accepted my proposal for this work.

At my request, Follen provided me with information about its recent history, programs, giving patterns, and growth, which I read and analyzed. My goal was to assess Follen's fundraising capacity, to identify any objections or concerns that must be addressed for a campaign to succeed, and to estimate a realistic campaign goal.

In September and October, the Committee and I worked together to create an online survey and a plan for interviews with a sample of Follen's pledging households. Between October 13 and 20, I conducted 39 half-hour interviews. I asked participants to tell me how much they knew about capital project plans so far, and to let me know their attitude toward various project elements.

This report completes my formal involvement with Follen's efforts; however, I will be available to dig deeper into the information I have gathered to answer any further questions the church leadership may have.

III. Overview

Follen Church is a 181-year-old congregation named for its first minister, Charles Follen, who designed its distinctive octagonal sanctuary. With his wife Eliza Cabot, Follen was a leader in the movement to abolish slavery in the United States. Ralph Waldo Emerson often preached at the church during his transition out of the parish ministry.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Follen hit a low point after experiencing harsh conflicts and has since steadily recovered. Polly Guild's encouraging, non-domineering ministerial leadership (1976–92) was undoubtedly a factor in the growth of a capable, harmonious cadre of lay leaders. Barbara Marshman, a nationally known religious educator (1976–1988) established Follen as an exceptional place for families with children. Annual Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, started in 1961 by Louise Curtis, music director (1958–1996), have helped to sustain Follen's spirits and reputation during and after the years of difficulty.

By 1993, when Lucinda Duncan's ministry began, Follen seems largely to have healed, and the foundation laid for continued growth in a time when many other left-of-

center congregations were declining. After an 18-year ministry, Lucinda retired in 2011. After a two-year interim, Claire Feingold Thoryn began a ministry marked by a burst of growth, now is in its fourth year.

I have had the privilege of having known several of Follen’s recent ministers and other leaders, including Herb Adams, Louise Curtis, Polly Guild, Barbara Marshman, and Lucinda Duncan. As a graduate student in the 1970s, I came to Follen’s Thursday potluck suppers. Over the years, I have had many friends and acquaintances at Follen, and since 1999 or so I have consulted with its leaders several times about strategic planning and fundraising. It has always been a pleasure to dip into Follen’s life, and never more so than at this exciting time.

This feasibility study has three parts: an online survey sent to 430 members and friends, my interviews with potential donors, and my review of written data provided by the church office. The Capital Campaign Exploratory Committee is responsible for the online survey and will report separately on those results.

IV. The interview samples

The sample for my interviews was drawn from the 136 households who pledged \$1000 or more to Follen in the 2015-16 fiscal year. (In addition, 96 households pledged less than \$1000). I selected 49 households to be invited to interview, using the following criteria:

- Lead Givers: All the top 12 pledging households (5%).
- High Givers: 14 households chosen randomly from among the next 36 highest pledgers (15%), and
- General Givers: 26 households chosen randomly from among the remaining 110 households that pledged \$1000 or more.

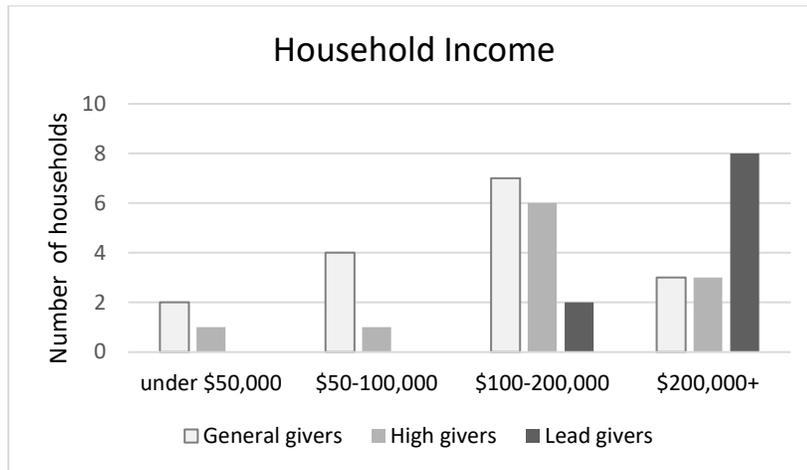
The Committee invited all 49 sample households to come in for an interview, and kept working till they had come close to a goal of 40 interviews. Between October 13 and 17, I spoke with representatives of 36 households. During the following week, I interviewed members of three more households by phone, for a total of 39 interviews.

Here is a profile of the three sub-samples:

	General givers	High givers	Lead givers
Number interviewed	17	12	10
Median years at Follen	21	24	19
Median age range	51-65	65+	51-65
Households with children in RE	8	3	3
Median 2015-16 pledge ¹	\$2,000	\$4,000	\$11,000

¹ All dollar amounts in this report are rounded to two significant digits.

The following chart shows how the two samples compare in terms of their reported household income.



Not surprisingly, Lead and High Givers, drawn from the top 20% of pledging households, include more relatively high-income families and were less likely to have children in the religious education program. From an informal analysis, it appears that all three samples are reasonably typical of the populations they represent. In my opinion their responses may with caution be projected to the full congregation.

V. Findings from the interviews

Early in each interview, I invited each individual or couple how long they had been part of the Follen community. By far the most frequent response was some variation of, “Let’s see, how old is [oldest child]?” Some respondents had come to Follen because of the choir or the East Village Fair, because of a personal attachment to Unitarian Universalism, or because the building was within an easy walk from home. But for the largest group, Follen’s main attraction has been its reputation as a church home for families with children.

Follen’s Strengths

The question, “What are the strengths of this congregation; what does it do best?” drew a surprising unity of response. Interestingly, in this connection hardly anyone mentioned religious education for young children, though the Youth Choir and FUUY youth group drew some mentions. Recent leadership transitions in RE apparently have raised some doubts. Nor does everyone find Follen friendly: “For a New England institution, it does a pretty good job of being friendly” was one Yankee’s dour opinion.

Virtually everyone agrees, though, is that once you make it into Follen, its community is **organizationally and spiritually sound**. “Follen functions as a caring, conscientious community.” “Long-term relationships.” “Awesome community for those who are part of it.” “Support each other.” “Community across generations.”

Almost everyone also expressed **enthusiasm about Claire Feingold Thoryn’s ministry**. “Religious aspect has gotten stronger in recent years.” “It challenges you to think about things in a different light.” “Claire is the best thing about Follen right now.” I did hear

one or two criticisms or concerns as well, which is neither surprising nor unusual, except that they were expressed respectfully and with appreciation for her ministry.

A third area of all but universal agreement is that **Follen's recent growth is a good thing**. I cannot stress too much how unusual this is. For current members, growth brings inconvenience, crowding, and unwelcome change, and so most people have mixed feeling about it. At Follen, virtually everyone expressed excitement about the church's growth.

What needs attention

I also asked people about any special concerns they might have about Follen, and what aspects needed attention right now. From many people, these questions drew a complete blank, because they personally were basically happy. Several mentioned items on the capital campaign project list, particularly those intended to **relieve crowding**, and the related issue of moving to two Sunday sessions all the time.

More institutionally-minded folks identified some challenges on the horizon, such as **adapting to the nearly total turnover of paid staff**. Others pointed to a **generational shift** at Follen, as the generation that grew up together under the leadership of the "Troika" of Polly, Barbara, and Louise in the 1970s and 80s passes the baton to newer leaders, and as the Follen membership tilts toward yet newer people attracted by Claire's ministry.

These concerns all seem to me quite realistic and constructive. Overall, I would say that in many years of doing interviews in congregations, I have not often observed enthusiasm, realism, and institutional skill to match what I have experienced at Follen.

Attitude toward a capital project

Most of the interviewees were already familiar with the ten "elements" of a possible capital campaign listed on the "Follen Dreams BIG" questionnaire, and most had already responded. Consequently, many came in primed to speak specifically to those elements—to the point that I found it a bit challenging in some cases to get any information about other aspects of the church. I would say that awareness of the emerging plan is relatively high.

Everyone endorsed **universal access** as a high priority. People expressed pride in Follen's distinctive octagonal building, but are embarrassed by the complicated and outdated system for getting wheelchair users in and out. A couple of people expressed concern that a better solution might be too expensive, but no one found the status quo acceptable.

Beyond this one unanimous priority, opinion was more mixed. Many people said they did not know enough about the heating and air conditioning systems to have an informed opinion. The more people knew about the Stone Building, the more they seemed to wonder whether Follen could do anything with it, given deed restrictions on the property.

Almost everyone agreed that Follen has a space problem stemming from increased attendance, though not everyone agreed that "a bigger, brighter Community Center" was the right solution. Many mentioned the possibility of holding two services more frequently, and some said that it was more important to have "varied spaces" than to fit the whole congregation into one room. "We can rent a place for the annual dinner." Others suggested

that the problem with the Community Center might be more a matter of acoustics than size.

A few interviewees had elaborate plans of their own, ranging from adding another floor to the Community Center building to tearing down the Marshman Center and replacing it with new construction.

A small but significant group of potential donors expressed concern that Follen might incur substantial debt for a building project.

I asked if there was anything in that could be dropped from the list. The most frequent answer was “**the children’s chapel**” (14 households). I heard very little support for a dedicated children’s chapel, and some firm opposition, though some wondered whether a children’s worship space could be part of a wider flexible-use plan.

The capital project element whose purpose was least clear to those I spoke with is the one called “**Social Justice**” in the questionnaire, and which mentions the **Stone Building**. Twelve households named the idea of acquiring the Stone Building or setting up a social-justice center as an item that could be dropped, for several reasons. A couple of people expressed concern about Follen becoming even more politically aligned than it already is. Others doubted that the legal issues limiting the use of the Stone Building could be overcome. Still others rolled their eyes at the likely cost of making the Stone Building usable. Of all the elements on the list, this one will require the most work before it can achieve broad congregational support.

Other observations

Follen has long practiced a Unitarian Universalist version of what, in synagogues, is sometimes called “pediatric Judaism.” Because of the strong role of the children’s choirs and musical productions in sustaining the church through the conflicts of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the importance of religious education in restoring the congregation afterward, **Follen is known as a great church for families with children and teenagers**. A challenge that goes with this strength is the need to offer parents a reason to continue their affiliation after children leave.

Despite its early history in the literary flowering of New England, pulpit eloquence has not been at the center of Follen’s life in recent decades. Ministers and other staff have been known instead for being female (which was remarkable in 1975) and for their encouraging, collaborative style. **Today Follen is more centered on its pulpit than it has been in a long time**. The implications of this shift for Follen’s future is beyond the scope of this feasibility study, but here are some of the elements that I believe to be important:

- A church whose attendance rises beyond about 200 adults and children moves into an **awkward zone** between the Pastoral and Multi-cell size categories. Many churches get stuck here if they fail to find ways of incorporating people that work at a larger scale.²

² Multi-cell is a better name for the Program size category. I have written about congregation size in chapter 7 of *Governance and Ministry*, 2d edition.

- The decision whether to go to **two Sunday sessions** (not just two worship services) is critical. To make room for a significantly larger congregation, a two-session model must provide more seats *and* more opportunities for involvement. Duplicating the whole musical, educational, and social experience is a much bigger practical and budgetary step than most leaders at Follen yet appreciate.
- The **demographics of Lexington** are changing. Rising home prices are bringing more affluent people to the area. Many newcomers come from ethnic groups whose patterns of religious participation do not make it easy for them to fit in to Follen’s Protestant-derived churchgoing practices.
- Follen has made shifts in staffing to accommodate cultural and social changes, but I suspect that there is much yet to be done, working with those new staff leaders, to **ensure that future Follenites’ experience is as rich as their predecessors’**.

Follen is in a much stronger overall position than most liberal religious congregations in our time. It is lucky to be located where people look for a child-friendly congregation, and lucky to have found a minister whose style and message are appealing to such a wide range of people. But taking advantage of good luck is never simple or inevitable. It takes a strong cadre of leaders who are willing to address hard choices that attend success.

VI. Projecting a campaign goal

Setting a reasonable goal for a capital campaign is more art than science, especially when the contours of the proposed project have yet to be defined precisely. Donors at this early stage will indicate their willingness to give based on their general enthusiasm for the church and their trust in its leadership.

Later, after the church has decided on a plan, it is important that potential donors be well informed about it and convinced that it is prudent and well-focused on the congregation’s needs and goals. If all goes well, actual gifts can be expected to exceed what donors signal early on.

With this caveat, I use three methods to estimate a capital campaign goal:

Method 1

One approach is to observe that many congregations have raised between 3 and 5 times their annual giving in a capital campaign. Follen’s 2015–16 pledge drive raised about \$470,000.

Method 1 projects a goal of between \$1,400,000 and \$2,400,000.

Obviously, these numbers have nothing to do with data from the current study. I did hear from several people at Follen that a capital campaign pledge should be “about 2 or 3 times your annual pledge.” If the capital goal is ambitious, this impression will need to be corrected. Not everyone who can pledge annually can or will make a large capital gift, so those who do make capital gifts must set their sights a little higher.

Method 2

A second method assumes that the interview samples are representative of the populations from which they are drawn:

- The Lead Givers sample of 10, drawn from the top 12 contributing households, volunteered a total estimated capital pledge of \$440,000. If the sample is representative of all Lead Giver households, the total from this group will be \$528,000.
- The High Givers sample of 12 drawn from the next 36 contributing households offered a total estimated capital pledge of \$150,000. If this sample is representative of all High Giver households, the total from this group would be \$450,000.
- The General Givers sample of 12 drawn from the remaining 110 households that pledged \$1000 or more, offered a total estimated capital pledge of \$86,000. If the sample is representative of all Lead Giver households, the total from this group would be \$1,300,000.

Method 2 projects a campaign goal of about \$2,300,000.

To arrive at the numbers shown above, I converted the data from each household, consisting of a broad range chosen from a chart, into an estimated number. In making this subjective step, I considered the less structured conversation that took place in the interview.

In addition, it should be noted that all the samples are to some extent self-selecting, as not everyone who was invited to participate did so. In my judgment, the process was as scientific as could be expected, but not more so! I would be particularly cautious about the reliability of the estimated capital gifts from the General Givers sample, because this sample was affected most by self-selection.

Method 3

A third method assumes that people will ultimately give to a capital campaign in about the same proportions as they give to the operating campaign. In other words, it does not assume that the samples are representative of the populations from which they are drawn. Instead it assumes that the sample households will give the same percentage of the capital fund as they do of the operating fund:

	Lead Givers	High Givers	General Givers
Total 2015–16 pledges from sample	\$ 100,000	54,000	30,000
Total 2015–16 pledges from population	120,000	160,000	150,000
Percent of 2015–16 pledges that came from sample households	83%	34%	20%
Total capital gift estimates from sample households	\$ 440,000	150,000	86,000
Projected capital gifts from the population	\$ 530,000	440,000	440,000

Method 3 projects a campaign goal of approximately \$1,400,000.

This method is the most conservative of the three, because in practice, capital giving is generally much more stratified than annual giving, in part because wealth is much more stratified than income.

VII. Recommendations

In preparing for this study, the Committee wondered whether it was better to proceed now, or wait till the capital project was developed further. I suggested that if we went ahead now, the study would shed light on the congregation's understanding and support of the purposes to be achieved, more than on specifics of the project.

My study affirms Follen's efforts so far, and points to some next steps:

1. Affirm the principles that must guide any capital project at Follen

Universal access is the most widely supported element of the plan thus far. However, universal access is not so much a goal as a principle. Whatever Follen does from here on out must adhere to current standards of accessibility. In this light, universal access is like "Greening." Another principle, so deeply held it seems not to need stating, is historical preservation.

I believe that to enjoy widespread support, any project must adhere to each of these three principles: **universal access, green-friendliness, and historical preservation**. Accordingly, it may be helpful to treat these as "givens" rather than as project elements.

2. Commit to a plan for making room for more people

Follen has reached the point where space concerns already are impacting growth. Adult attendance, which averaged around 120–140 from 2005 to 2010, had increased to 164 last year. The Sunday I attended seven people stood in the back. I am a believer in the 80% Rule,³ and by that standard Follen's growth is already curbed by sanctuary crowding.

Some parts of the proposed project address crowding, but without a comprehensive plan for making room for a larger congregation, it will be difficult to sell expensive projects. Some people like the concept of a larger Community Center, for example—but it's hard to see how this alone would create space for significant growth.

It is one thing to make life better for the current congregation, and another to make room for significantly more people. Yet more complicated is the challenge of providing an expanded congregation with the quality of life that make Follen so attractive.

Assuming that expanding the sanctuary is impossible without violating the historic preservation principle, I see no alternative to planning for two sessions on a Sunday. This mean doubling the opportunities to worship *and* to participate in music *and* for religious

³ "How Full is Too Full? Testing the "80 Percent Rule," <http://danhotchkiss.com/publications/how-full-is-too-full-testing-the-80-percent-rule/>.

education as part of a one-hour family experience. In short, it means offering twice as many people the experience that is now so popular.

The most frequent mistake congregations make in doubling the Sunday schedule is to leave one service alone and add a second that becomes a low-attendance, second-class experience. If the purpose is to make more room, a goal should be for the two sessions to be as close to equal as possible numerically. A good method is to make sure no one knows which service is the “old” one and which is the “new.” Neither service should be at the “old” time, neither should have the “old” music, and neither should have the “old” RE schedule.

3. Sharpen the focus of the capital plan

In parallel with the above steps, the leadership must resolve the remaining ambiguities in the capital project plan. This work does not need to wait for the rest, though some parts of the plan might need to proceed on parallel tracks until decisions have been made about the Sunday schedule.

If the decision is to go to two Sunday sessions, it will become more important to enable people to come and go smoothly, and less important to accommodate the current overflow in the social hour. I can't help with the details, but I can say that a plan that fits together logically in support of an accepted strategy will maximize the money raised.

4. Set a reasonable campaign goal

In addition to the considerations listed in Section VI above, a capital campaign goal must be justified in relation to the perceived value of the work to be done. But on the assumption that the project Follen ultimately chooses will have wide support, I would feel comfortable aiming for a capital campaign goal anywhere from \$1,500,000 to \$2,000,000.

Before announcing a firm goal, I would want to secure a few of the top gifts. These can be secured through early conversations with prospective donors, making them aware of building plans as they emerge. Lead gifts are important in themselves, and also for their influence on smaller givers.

Appendix I: Households interviewed

I interviewed one or more members of the following 39 households, either in person or by telephone:

Ellen Adolph	Rev. John Hickey	Jan Maier
Howie and Beth Bernstein	Ellen Hilsinger & Ben	Mart & Karen Ojamaa
Jackie Buckley & Dawn Ridge	Magauran	Rich & Cathy Papazian
Brian Cali & Sophie Evett	Anne and Brad Howe	Rev. Parisa Parsa
Laurel Carpenter & Gregory	David Jacobson & Amanda	John Phelan
Shenstone	Agee	Melissa Howe Raberg
Sally Cassells & Andy Dixon	Fred Johnson	Hill & Lisa Snellings
Karen Edmonds & Don	Kyle & Alexis Johnson	Steve & Nancy Sofen
Snodgrass	John Lawlor	Lynne Stinson
George Grady	Walter and Betsy Leutz	Kim & Kathy Vandiver
Stan Griffith & Ann Schauffler	Lisa Levey	Dominique Vo
Bob & Sue Halliday	Beth Liao & Tim Dugan	David Weissburg & Lindy
Nick Hart & Ann Bobo	Karen Longeteig	Cassidy
Gordon Hardy & Alice Dunn	Laura Maltby	Amy Yee
Jackie Hawkinson	Rosemary McCrudden	

VIII. Appendix 2: Interview questions

You have been selected to be interviewed as part of a representative sample of the congregation. I will use a standard set of questions in every interview. Your answers will be kept confidential except where noted. I will, however, make notes for my report.

1. How long have you been associated with Follen Church? Are you a member?
2. What first attracted you to this congregation?
3. Have you ever been a member of another UU congregation? If so, where?
4. This Church offers a number of programs and activities for its members and friends, from Sunday Worship to coffee houses. What three programs or activities are most important to you?
5. From your perspective, what is the most pressing need of this Church at this time?
6. Do you have any special concerns about the Church?
7. Over the last seven months, committees of the Church have been gathering and developing ideas about changes and improvements that need to be made in the physical plant. Have you participated in this process, and if so, how?
8. What are the most important needs met by the proposed set of initiatives?
9. What, if anything, is missing from the proposed set of initiatives?
10. What, if anything, has been included that should be dropped?
11. On a scale of one to ten, what priority do you assign to the building program in the overall life of this Church? (If the answer is 5 or lower, then ask) What items rank higher in your mind?
12. Follen has grown significantly over the last several years. What feelings do you have about Follen's past or future growth?

I am going to ask a series of questions about finances: the answers will enable me to make

estimates of the congregation's capacity to finance the proposed building program. Please be assured that I will use your answers only to prepare a summary report with no names in it.

13. How many family units do you think would make a major gift (\$10,000 or more), payable over the next three years, in addition to their annual pledge?
14. If you were considering making a major gift, who would be the best person to ask you for that gift?
15. If you were asked to make a building pledge today, payable over the next three years, in which of the following categories would it likely fall? This is not a commitment on your part, but your honest answer will enable me to make an informed estimate of the congregation's capacity.

		Goals
2 gifts of at least	\$ 200,000	\$ 480,000
3 more gifts of at least	100,000	360,000
8 more gifts of at least	50,000	480,000
20 more gifts of at least	20,000	260,000
20 more gifts of at least	10,000	240,000
50 more gifts of at least	5,000	300,000
100 more "foundation" gifts		100,000
TOTAL		2,200,000

16. Is there someone outside the congregation that we should approach for a capital campaign contribution? A former member? A parent? People in the community.
17. A lot of volunteers are needed to run a capital fund drive. Is there any particular job you would like to do?
Office work ___ Canvassing ___ Social events ___ Telephoning ___ Other ___
18. What are the strengths of this congregation; what does it do best?
19. What areas, if any, need some attention?

Finally, a few questions to verify the demographics of this sample.

20. Do you have children enrolled in the religious education program? YES___ NO
21. Do you serve on a church committee? YES___ NO ___ If yes, which one(s)?
22. What is your age?
Under 30 31 to 40 41 to 50 51 to 65 Over 65
23. What is your annual household income?
Under \$50,000 50,000 to \$100,000 \$100,000 to \$200,000 Over \$200,000