

## A Brief Summary of the Congregational Survey November 2017

**The Sample.** There were 221 respondents, about 160 members (half our membership) and 60 others, including former members and those who have just recently started coming. The sample was only 19% age 50 or under, and almost 60% over age 65. Two-thirds of the sample was female, and 87% identified as straight. For some questions, a separate analysis was done for the subgroup age 50 and under (“the younger group”), but because of the small sample size (N=41), these results are only tentative. This younger group was included in the results for all 221 respondents.

The sample reported a high level of education, with virtually all having some post-secondary, and 45% having a master’s or doctoral degree. About 60% are retired, and another 20% work outside the home full time. The remaining 20% were divided among those holding multiple part-time jobs, students, stay-at-home parents, and those looking for work.

Twenty percent of the sample have been UU for five years or less (25% of the younger group). Forty percent reported seldom missing a service. Twenty-five percent can get to church in ten minutes or less, and 12% require more than 30 minutes. Some 80% come by car, 10% walk.

**Connections.** Two questions asked why people initially came to First Unitarian and why they stay. The five most common reasons (from the list presented) were: *celebrating common values, community and fellowship, intellectual stimulation, UU beliefs, and the minister*. The three reasons that were at the bottom of the list are *involvement with the broader UU movement, adult RE, and LGBT support or issues*. Reasons to come initially and to stay were largely the same, except children’s RE became less important, presumably because some members’ children have become too old for the program. For the younger group, *the minister* and *community and humanitarian action* were less important.

A series of questions examined involvement in the congregation. When asked about type of involvement over the past two years, the average respondent checked 3.4 of the eight choices offered, with *being on a committee, assisting with a manual task, helping with the fall fair, and attending a group* all checked by more than 50% of the respondents. Some 40% reported spending more than six hours per week on these activities. However, 2/3 of the sample reported never attending a small group, and 70% have never attended an adult RE program. Again, 70% reported either never having assisted at Children’s RE, or not having done so within the last ten years. Correspondingly, 30% have taught either currently or in the last ten years.

**Theologies.** A question was asked about personal theology, offering 15 alternatives plus *other*. The average respondent checked 2.2 choices. Over 60% checked *humanism*, and over 20% checked each of *naturalistic theism* and *mysticism*. Six other choices were checked by between 10% and 15% of respondents: *earth-centred spirituality, non-theism, pantheism, “strict” agnosticism or skepticism, theism, and “open” agnosticism*.

People were asked what other religions they feel a connection to. The most common responses were none (~40%), Christianity (~30%) and Buddhism (~20%). When asked about childhood religion, the most common responses were Christianity (77%), UUism (11%) and none (~10%).

**Ministerial Priorities.** Respondents were presented with a list (developed by the UUA) of 20 characteristics or skills desired in a ministerial team. It is not clear how many people noticed that the question referred to the entire team rather than to the prospective minister alone. The results offer little guidance. Too many of the list were judged by too many people as *quite* important or *extremely* important, yielding no discrimination.

- There were four choices rated between *quite* important and *extremely* important: *preaching and spiritual leadership*, *welcoming diversity*, *establishing congregational direction and vision*, and *congregational community building*.
- All other choices were closer to *quite* important than *somewhat* important except *involvement in the wider UU movement*, which trailed the other options slightly.

A later question asked for the three most important skills of a new minister. *Being an inspirational speaker* and *being good at communication* were checked by more than 50% of respondents, and *being willing to deal with conflict* and *being friendly and approachable* were checked by about 40% or more.

Almost 90% of respondents expressed belief in uncensored freedom of the pulpit, dropping to about 60% for the minister expressing political views.

There were questions on desired personal characteristics of the prospective new ministry. About 15% would be pleased with a younger minister and 20% would have a problem with an older one. About 13% would prefer a female minister. About 15% would have a problem with a transgender minister and about 10% with a pan/bisexual minister. Six percent would have difficulty with a physically challenged minister.

**Worship Preferences.** People were asked about why they come on Sundays. Four reasons were checked by more than 40% of respondents: *celebration of common values*, *intellectual stimulation*, *building community*, and *personal reflection and meditation*. The three checked by fewer than about 15% of the respondents were: *fellowship period after services*, *a mystical, spiritual experience*, and *an affirming emotional experience*.

When asked about comfort level with traditional religious language such as *god* or *prayer*, the responses were widely spread: 27% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were comfortable, 33% were neutral, and 40% agreed or strongly agreed. In a parallel question about whether the minister should insert personal experience in sermons, fewer than 2% disagreed.

On the question of popular sermon topics, both the entire sample and the younger group rated as the top two *spiritual growth* and *help with challenges of everyday life*. Third for the entire sample was *social justice and action*, but for the younger group, it was *philosophical ideas*.

**Household Information.** It is important to remember that this information comes from the sample, not from the entire congregation. There were over 300 adults living in the households of

respondents, with ~80% of them participating at Ottawa First Unitarian. Over 80% of the children under 13 in these households participate, but fewer than 20% of the older and adult children (living at home) participate.

We are a wealthy group, with almost 70% of households reporting an income over \$50,000 and 30% reporting over \$100,000. Reported pledging amounts were distributed much as they are in the entire congregation.

## **Open-Ended Questions**

Note that these categories of responses were created after-the-fact by the analyst in order to organize the variety of opinions. They were not offered to respondents as choices.

***Biggest mistake of a new minister.*** One mistake stood out among all, with more than 30% saying *not listening and getting to know us before imposing ideas*. Five others were checked by 10±3% of respondents: *not observing right relations, being cold and insincere, not dealing with conflict, showing poor leadership by being too soft, and offering poor sermons*.

***What are our congregational strengths?*** Three comments were checked by more than 30% of respondents: *lay leadership (enthusiasm, talent, commitment), caring and welcoming, and social action*. *Music* was offered by ~20% of respondents, and three other ideas by more than 10% of respondents: *inclusivity, diversity and acceptance; the campus and building; and our common values and principles*.

***What are our congregational weaknesses?*** Two ideas were offered by between 20% and 30% of respondents: *aging, lack of young people and families and not living by our principles and covenant*. Two more were offered by about 10% of respondents: *being cliquish, complacent, and unwelcoming* and *having too much diversity of activity*. Four were offered by between 5% and 10% of respondents: *children's RE, lack of internal communication and support (for staff and volunteers), reluctance to change and financial issues*.

***What committees or teams have had the greatest success?*** Three teams stood out, with more than 30% suggesting *social justice groups (excluding sanctuary/refugees), the fall fair, and the sanctuary project*. About 10% suggested *the choir, the caring committee, and the campus and building committees*. Slightly fewer mentioned the *financial operation (including board and stewardship)* and *the welcoming and membership committees*.

***What committees or teams have had the greatest challenges?*** This question was not always interpreted as the search committee intended. The plan was to ask which committees had the most trouble, but some replied with views on what committees had the biggest problems to deal with. For example, the environment committee because global warming is such a huge problem. About 30% of respondents offered *children's RE and stewardship, and finance*. Some 20% suggested *social responsibility*, while about 10% offered the *board and personnel committees*.

***What is at the “heart” of our congregation?*** The overwhelming response from more than 50% of respondents was *community and caring*. About 25% suggested our *shared values and principles*, and *social justice* was mentioned by ~15%. About ten people, 6%, said that they had been unable to find it.

***What congregational issues are likely to be most pressing within the next couple of years?*** Between 35% and 40% of responses talked about *aging (including getting more young families and more younger volunteers)*, and *membership* in general. Around 25% mentioned our *finances* and our *RE program, including that for youth*. Between 10% and 15% mentioned getting and learning to work with a *new minister*, and working on the *problems of right relations*.

***What congregational issues are likely to be most pressing over the next ten years?*** The problems above, those within the next couple of years, were mentioned again, along with *clarifying our mission and staying relevant (~20%)* and *maintaining our campus and building*, including the impact of the new LRT.

***What congregational issues may never be resolved?*** Between 10% and 15% of responses mentioned *resources (both financial and human)*, that we are *very individualistic and difficult to manage*, and that there will always be *conflicted relationships*. On a positive note, a similar percentage said that *everything will be okay*, or, that *there is nothing we can't resolve*.

This item also elicited a huge variety of responses, quite impossible to summarize. There are at least 30-40 ideas each mentioned by only one or two people. These responses themselves show our true diversity of thought.

***Additional comments.*** Apart from reiterations of ideas already expressed, there were only two comments that occurred with any frequency. Almost 20% expressed *positive feelings toward the search committee and the survey*, and almost 10% said that *they did not feel welcome*. Apart from that, the responses were similar to those above – a very large number of ideas each expressed by one or two people. Surely our diversity is both our strength and our weakness.