

**COMPILED INPUT FROM
COTTAGE/FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS
November 10, 2020**

Below you will find notes from the 38 Cottage Meetings and Focus Groups held during the months of September and October. In an attempt to maintain the integrity of the voices we heard from; we have categorized them into thematic areas but otherwise left them unedited.

Congregational Values/Culture

- We are welcoming, but because we are so large, people can drift away without notice.
- Congregation is welcoming initially, but then somewhat superficial after that. Small groups help with this. There are a lot of our members that come to a service, listen, go home and then get involved in other things.
- We've taken a long journey to becoming a Welcoming Congregation; LGBTQ+ people feel comfortable in our congregation, but we have not done such a good job welcoming BIPOC.
- Due to our size, it's hard to make connections.
- Our large size means that we have a lot of silos which erode feelings of unity.
- Largely homogenous in color, culture, and class. We are culturally homogenous, very white, and culturally American.
- Diversity exists in beliefs, configuration of families, LGBTQ.
- We are a composition of people that are socially engaged, educated with income.
- We are a culture of white, educated, older, and more female and we used to be an extension of the University but not so much anymore.
- Lean toward intellectual, tends to be older age; shortage of younger families and younger people. Important to get more young people into the congregation.
- Some people feel we've made real progress and others feel we haven't made progress on homogeneity.
- Suspect we are intimidating to minorities and those of lesser means.
- Our congregation is like the story of *The Little Red Hen* because of this, independent ideas then to have a lack of cohesion. We are a group of very enthusiastic people with a very limited number of active people. Limited in time, etc. these are the same folks that are in choir, RE and this is a prescription for burn out.
- Too many consumers, not enough doers.
- Very deeply caring. About each other, about FUS, about the larger world.
- We are lifelong learners.
- Critical thinkers who are not shy about voicing strong opinions. Sometimes to the point of hurtful.
- We are Midwest nice, not too direct, sandwiched in praise and not quite honest.
- It is an open-minded place where all ideas are accepted.
- We value speaking your truth perhaps more than we value listening to others who have a different perspective from us. We could be better listeners.
- FUS had been part of Madison for over a century and a half. We have had powerful figures leading the Society and have been well respected. A lot of our identity is derived from our connection to the University, faculty and staff and is a big source of strength of this group traditionally. Not sure about now.

- UW founded faith community, leadership (Max & Michael), movers and shakers. This set the framework for our history and for the past 20 years we've been trying to break out of it. 2 sister congregations have broken off, rebelled, and we've maintained our niche of traditionalism.
- For years, we were a one minister congregation with lots of volunteers. Over the past years, we have increased the size of the staff and everyone was comfortable and is still part of the music and traditions.
- We are a lot of nice people.

MEMBERSHIP ENGAGEMENT

- Growth didn't happen after new building as anticipated (economic downturn).
- Compared to other churches, we do not give well financially. Just because you are large doesn't mean you give large.
- Some attend weekly program/gatherings but may not attend services. Small group ministry, music, or RE provide strong connections for those engaged in them.
- Probably only 1/4 of members are actively involved.
- 10 years ago, we had larger membership. More men were involved. Financing of FUS calls for a larger congregation. Need to think about membership diversity not just in terms of racial, but also age, gender, etc.
- Gender affects engagement in congregation; more women volunteer.
- When did the growth happen? What caused us to take the step to make such a grand addition? We felt we were limiting the exposure of community to FUS because we couldn't welcome them.
- There exists a small hardworking core of active volunteers who carry out the work of the congregation.
- 10% do all the work in the congregation.

ROLE OF MUSIC

- We highly value music; music is a strong part of our congregation.
- High quality music program with high standards. Music is a much-loved part of our services.
- Lovers of music
- Music is a huge part of our culture. Elsworth, Dan, Drew. Big part of our worship and something we're very proud of.
- Music is really important and holds the congregation together in many ways.
- Strongly oriented to the arts.
- Choirs have a strong social factor.

SOCIAL/ENVIRONMENTAL/RACIAL JUSTICE

- Socially justice motivated. Lots of interest but at only at the fledgling stage, beginning to pick up speed in that direction.
- Turning towards Social Justice & Racial Justice in recent years. We don't know what that means and how to do it, but it feels important to us.
- We have big wonderful intentions for Social Justice; we want to do it all. Some focus in there might give us more oomph.
- We may be behind smaller churches with our racism equity work as it is "hard to steer a battleship" because of our size.
- Aside from spiritual values, we seek to find meaningful ways to advocate for climate, environment, and social justice. Many people are engaged in social justice efforts at FUS and

also community wide. We are engaged in choices about our future for our lives and our offspring.

- We have a strong emphasis on social justice in keeping with our UU principles.
- Many of us were attracted to FUS because of our active tolerance.
- We wish to be a beacon for social justice in the community.
- We are leaders in environmental justice issues.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

- Have a strong Children's Religious Education (CRE) program. Draws families to the church. However less than half of those parents stay with church after their children bridge out of CRE.
- Our RE Program and the role of children is extremely important and it pulls on your heartstrings. Integration of children is done well.
- Because we have RE at the same time as the service, we miss out on intergenerational opportunities.
- Many people expressed missing the robust selection of adult RE classes that enriched their lives and helped them make connections with other members in the FUS community (these were greatly reduced when we consolidated the Membership Coordinator and Adult RE positions).

WE DESIRE TO CONNECT AS A COMMUNITY (BUT SOMETIMES FEEL DISCONNECTED)

- The large size of our congregation makes it hard to meet people, feel connected with a sense of community.
- Big--both beautiful/wonderful AND challenging to find connections. Many ways to connect and that can be challenging.
- Small groups are the key to get connected with people. Hard to make meaningful connections with people outside of small groups.
- Each group, to an extent, feels neglected. There are a lot of really caring connections, mostly via small groups where members find deep caring. Sometimes it is hard for people to receive or feel that caring.
- We are 3 separate congregations (3 different services).
- Community is fragmented into silos. Some see it as a necessity of being a large congregation. Others thought it is something to improve upon.
- Not everyone is able to make connections; those who don't usually drop off.
- Because we are so big, there are silos and cliques related to the groups one is a part of. Sometimes there is territoriality around resources (\$ and volunteers) for those groups/silos.
- Virtual Coffee Hours have felt more accessible to many compared to Coffee Hour in the Commons.
- Many reported a desire for more intergenerational connections.
- Look at us more as a group of subcultures - different services, interest groups, ministry teams. Not a lot of cross fertilization between various groups.
- Important to have someone who can bring us back together. Many people expressed frustration that the transition process has gone on too long.
- Small groups allow people to find a niche to connect with others. We are a welcoming community where it is hard to find a friend.
- Sometimes hard to get acquainted with people. In coffee hour, the acoustics make it hard to hear. There are not enough places to just sit and talk with others. Largely staff organized; we depend on staff a lot. Maybe due to being a large organization.
- Warm and welcoming people, but it takes persistence to "work your way in."

- White, highly educated, social standards are very high. Other UU churches have people from all different backgrounds; much more so than we do. We have a great pride in our history and our building, which sometimes is more important than what we do in the community. Virtual coffee hours involve few people. Need to help new people feel they belong. Virtual coffee hours are meaningful because we are in small groups and can hear each other.
- Can be helpful to have fractals, ways we are connected. What might that look like to be a community of community? Threshold Choir--leaderful community. Anytime a committee/ministry has an opening, there are lots of people ready to fill that role, building leaders, cycling in and out.
- Heard a longing to be more connected, unified as a congregation.
- Longing for mission/vision to unify us. Central core that pulls us together.
- Intergenerational
- Many factions: RE families/volunteers, choir, lay leaders, SJ volunteers, different services. That single area has enough breadth and need for volunteers that you can have a hard time breaking free of that niche.

THEOLOGY

- A place that draws from many sources of world religions and where different beliefs are respected.
- This is our area of highest diversity: our religious beliefs. It is also our point of greatest unity: a respect for different religious beliefs and for everyone's independent spiritual journey.
- We are unified under 7 principles.
- Some sensitivity to uppercase God, due to hurtful experiences with faith of upbringing.
- Diverse, not in race, but in spiritual beliefs.
- Openness and welcoming to diverse lines of spiritual paths and truth. Hope we can continue to celebrate that. Affirming to searching people. Regardless of where people are, they can belong here. This community stands out in the religious world as a place where you can search, question, be uncertain.

WORSHIP

- Groups of people prioritize things differently. For many academic stimulation comes first, for others emotional connection is first, and for others it is social justice.
- Sat. service is less formal than the Sun. services. Tension between how important is to be intellectually challenged and nurtured versus personal development.
- We are a congregation that values intellectual stimulation and emotional connection. From here we are not sure what that looks like and it is a source of conflict. In the past services she felt like she was attending a college class she did not sign up for. It feels like others felt that way too.
- Older members are interested in having a minister who provides intellectually dense/thought providing sermons. The younger population seem to be looking for thought-provoking ideas, but also the heart side to come across in the services.
- Want our curiosity to be simulated. Want a new minister to reach a high standard.
- We're a congregation that wants thought provoking topics. We don't want to be preached at or lectured to.
- Need to continue to emphasize intellectual sermons. Need to engage minds as well as emotions. Strong music program supports this.
- Split between Head vs heart--whether it's true or not, we are very concerned by this.

- Group of people who are looking for spiritual community and to connect with their heart; there is another large contingent that wants their reason appealed to, to be challenged, connected to their "better angel" through acts of justice.

STAFF

- Overworked and underpaid staff.
- Highly skilled, dedicated staff.
- Staff need to be acknowledged, valued for dedication, talent and commitment.
- The staff be paid fair compensation with a healthy workload.
- Desire to see a happy staff; not an overworked, stressed and underpaid staff.
- Hope that in the future we will have a well-paid staff and 3-4 ministers.
- If we are going to grow and be more engaged, we need 3 ministers.
- Honestly address conflict.
- Keep Kelly happy!
- In the future, hope that staff will have time to think and be creative vs. always juggling balls. More use of volunteers. More young people involved.

DENOMINATION

- Some people want closer ties to UUA; others don't care.
- Greater presence in the denomination.
- Provide leadership at the denominational level.
- Ignore UUA and put FUS first.
- Our individualistic culture extends to our lack of support for the UUA.
- More collegial relationship with James Reeb & Prairie, in more ways than Social Justice. Continue doing services together, as during early COVID, perhaps quarterly or in summer.
- Help other UU congregations to grow.
- Have UUA connections reflected in their relationships with other ministerial colleagues with a support network that goes outside of the congregation so we can all work together.
- Would like Madison and FUS to become entities of genuine global significance & impact, leaders in global new future.

BROADER COMMUNITY

- Better partner in working collaboratively on community initiatives.
- Stronger presence within the congregation and in the Madison area for our Social Justice, Environmental Justice & Music programs (on other stages, etc.).
- Beacon of light within the community. A vocal voice for progressive values. Hope our ministers can be a passionate advocate, vocal in communicating that message.
- Deeper connection with other faith groups in area.
- More diversity, clarity and focus in serving the deepest needs with clear interest in the external community.
- We would like to be a respected voice in the community.

OPPORTUNITY/POTENTIAL

- We're at the crosshairs of a church run by church ladies and a nonprofit run with a well-defined management structure--being a group of volunteers vs. running our church like a business, there

are some things we could learn about a socially responsible management structure that could help further the work of our ministry teams.

- Bricks and mortar has taken over the energy that should go into community and spirit. The old building is now the right size for our congregation as we have shrunk. Would love to move back into the old building and rent out the new addition.
- We don't think about our large congregation as an untapped potential. We can do a lot of things that smaller congregations that can't do. Not just the building. Quest as a program wouldn't have been as sizable a program. Think of it as unwieldy but it's also an opportunity. Music program is so successful because of our size. It's a plus if we want it to be.

MINISTER ROLE

- We have had a hierarchical leadership model for the past 60 years and some want to continue that more traditional model; others want to be more experimental, have more diversity, more collaborative ministry model.
- Have had only 2 head ministers. Many of our old guard are resistant to change.
- A team player who can bring us together as a community, who is inspiring, who will support our congregation and staff, shares in a team spirit, that could help us heal and grow,
- Want a new minister to challenge, work with us, to work together for new goals that will unite us. Have projects that people could get behind. Get old, new, long term members together.
- We are a fractional congregation after 5 decades of a one-man hierarchical leadership. That old model is slowly changing during the interim transition. We are a work in progress and we need loving guidance.
- Younger people desire a less of a top down leadership and older people are not as used to this.
- Removal of ministerial hierarchy. Break down of hierarchy to see ministers give to the community in their unique ways.
- Collaboration with Kelly, someone who can partner with her and work to split duties equitably. Equitable partnership.
- Complementary to Kelly.
- Regardless of what we title our ministers, they will work together with a deep commitment to congregational life. There will be clear delineation of responsibilities, but not in a hierarchy.
- A tradition of hierarchical structure influences us.
- Historically needs were being met with intellectual minister in learning how to become better people.
- Ministers work to divide tasks cooperatively, working with staff as a team, and not just a minister that makes the decisions.
- Many people are still actively grieving Michael's departure.
- Help heal and bring us together.
- Facilitate community building. Using workshop or social hour integrated to connect us.
- Thought leader.
- Want to be known as a leader for liberal religious values and SJ in community. Leader with other faith leaders.

MINISTERIAL QUALITIES

- We need someone to help with team building and to get more people to be participants rather than consumers.
- Would like our ministers to be leaders in human rights and environmental stewards.
- Anti-racism background.

- Community organizer.
- We want our ministers to provide some community leadership, be prepared to speak out on our behalf.
- Facilitate community building. Using workshop or social hour integrated to connect us.
- We will have a new minister who is gentle, with a can-do attitude.
- Connect us to Regional & UUA, larger UU community.
- UUA connections and a strong collegial network.
- A minister that tends to the community with a heart and mind, not (just) brain.
- We need to balance new ideas and changes and point out the ways things have been.
- We need creative energy with other UU styles and ways to include people.
- Would welcome someone to throw a wrench and change some things.
- Strong communicator.
- Ability to nurture our souls and uplift our spirits.
- Provides spiritual uplift and is nurturing.
- Knows how to play on own strengths and invites others to share diversity of perspectives to round that out.
- It would be fun/interesting to see how others approach service so we could diversify congregation and how we deliver the service.
- Bring courage and clarity for what the congregation can be in the world.
- Can inspire us to be curious about and with each other.
- Lives and breathes UU values.
- Understanding, kind, give truthful answers to questions, especially with younger kids, don't talk to them in high voices, and talk to them as if they were a real part of the conversation. (CRE KIDS)
- Listen to kids' opinions and value them. (CRE KIDS)
- Be kind to everyone, even people with differences. (CRE KIDS)
- Be caring about the environment. (CRE KIDS)