

Results of the 2017 UUCP Census

6/14/18

Committee on Ministry

Summary

During the fall of 2017, a team of dedicated census takers surveyed members and friends of the UUCP. The results, a report of which is provided here, provide a look at the church community's opinion on a breadth of issues affecting the life of the church. The results indicate a general pleasure with the current state and direction of the church and provide a number of suggestions for strengthening the community. Those surveyed were impressed by the hired church leadership and staff including Reverend Elizabeth Stevens, Ginger Allen, Jon Anderson and Summer Stevens. In addition, the importance of the services, the satisfaction with Religious Exploration, the Church's community involvement, and church group participation were cited as central to the positive state of the community. Some important areas cited for improvement included better communication from the Board of Directors, prevention of burnout by active and key volunteers, some concerns about a lack of self-reflection and criticism, and concerns about the future of the facilities and impacts in terms of disability access, growth in attendance and community needs, along with the fear that the current location creates some exclusion of non-Moscow members. Diverse opinions were found about a number of topics, including the types of services and the use of technology during services. There was strong consensus that the surveys provided a needed forum for the community to be heard about important matters related to church life.

Results

The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Palouse conducted a census in the fall of 2017 to gather input from individuals and couples who are members or friends of the church. People on a master list of church members and friends were contacted soon after the pledge packages for 2018 were mailed. Approximately 27 "census-takers" conducted a total of 127 interviews between October 7, 2017 and January 17, 2018. Responses were gathered from approximately 75 individual members or friends of the church, along with some 20 individuals representing a couple and about 30 couples participating

jointly. In addition, two former or non-Unitarian Universalist members provided input. A rough estimate is that the large majority of these respondents were elderly or middle-aged. Five individuals declined to be interviewed.

General themes and topics of survey responses included gratitude for the community that the church provided, with its deeper connections and relationships with other people in the church community. Many people mentioned that although they don't come to church regularly, they feel connected to the church staff (an incredible "dream team!") and their fellow congregants, whom they perceive are warm, caring, welcoming, open, non-judgmental, and accepting – "you can be who you are, and don't have to be anything else!" They consider the church their "home," and their fellow members as friends whom they can call on for help and support; the Caring Committee was specifically mentioned as a major asset.

That said, some comments focused on the lack of younger people at the services and in general. Also, the coffee hour can be "odd," with people being too cliquey, sticking to their own age groups, and socializing with people whom they already know – "groups my age are friendly but closed."

Positive feelings were expressed about the Religious Education (RE) program and the Sunday morning services, as well as other services (pagan celebrations, vigils, etc.). The music, the talks and the sermons were especially recognized as important parts of the services. A number of people indicated that they like children remaining in the service through the children's story as well as its other multi-generational elements and services. Some comments expressed an appreciation of the "special" Sunday services – the ritual/celebratory ones held annually, including the Water Communion, Burning Ceremony (New Year), Rosh Hashanah-Reconciliation, Music Sunday, Gospel Sunday, Flower Communion, and inter-generational/youth-transition services.

In particular, Reverend Elisabeth's contributions to church services and leadership are highly valued. Her openness, intelligence, articulateness, and "deep level of consciousness," were specifically mentioned, as well as her "ability to connect mind, body, and soul" in homilies and readings that "integrate the intellectual and pragmatic with the poetic and spiritual." Other comments were that

Elisabeth serves an important role as a “wise guide” in our “troubling, difficult times,” who is helping people heal and “grow as people.” On a more individual level, there were several comments about how helpful she has been personally for people and their families (as is the Caring Committee). Several “old timers” commented that, of all the six or so ministers that the UUCP has had over the years, Elisabeth has proven to be the best.

Ginger, Jon, and Summer also were often mentioned as competent and committed staff members; their contributions to the church, which have resulted in excellent RE, Music, and administrative programs, are highly valued. RE is continuing to expand (most recently, with the Adult Education Bible class and burgeoning attendance at the “Parents Night Out” support group). The OWL program was specifically mentioned. The Music Program’s performances by the choir, the Jellybeans, and various other musicians during Sunday services are of a quality and diversity that exceed members’ expectations for such a relatively small church, although there was a desire for classical music pieces. Specific comments included that the UUCP is very lucky to have both an RE and a music director with the training and experience that Ginger and Jon have, and that these programs couldn’t be much better. Some people also mentioned their appreciation of the “Upcoming Events” email that Summer helps prepare and sends out every week, and also that it is great to have Veronica leading outreach programs at both universities now.

More general comments about the performance of the church’s various lay officials, committees, and groups indicate an appreciation of the lay leadership in the UUCP. One indication of their effectiveness is that many congregants are unaware of the church’s operations, decision-making, and accomplishments (“unseen wizards behind the curtain”). In addition, one respondent commented that they are always seeing or hearing mentions of the UUCP on the radio and other local media.

That said, some people felt uninformed and were concerned with the time taken by the board to make decisions and take action (e.g., the process for moving forward on planning for future facilities), and also the lack of communication about steps being taken to move forward. One suggestion was made that a long-range plan be prepared, with an articulation of priorities and specific, strategic

actions and a timetable for their completion, and reports on those in the board-chair's comments in the newsletter.

Some people were concerned that a minority of many of the same church members are volunteering with various weekly tasks (e.g., greeting and making coffee before the service, and cleaning up after coffee hour), as well as serving in other leadership functions (e.g., serving on task forces and committees) – with the potential for these particularly active volunteers to burn out; the volunteer pool needs to be deepened. (One active member was especially frustrated that people generally did not clean up after themselves in the church.) Elisabeth's work-load and the potential for burn-out, given her involvement and leadership regionally and nationally as well as locally, were also of particular concern.

An important consideration for the church's reliance on volunteers is that quite a few respondents indicated that they had previously served major church leadership roles in the past. One person noted that the volunteer situation is not unusual for an organization with a small membership and thus a relatively small pool of potential volunteers to start with, and whose members have often served in multiple positions and functions in the past. Additionally, current or potential UU's are likely to be involved in a variety of other social justice, charitable, and other community organizations and activities. Many respondents indicated how busy they currently are in other areas in their lives (work, school, other organizations), some with only occasional time even for church attendance, and others (especially the elderly) needing transportation (e.g., a van) to attend services and church functions.

People appreciate the ability to scale back or increase their personal participation in church affairs, depending on their current personal circumstances. Many people expressed the possibility for their greater involvement in the church in the future, once their children are grown or they are retired. One particular issue mentioned by several people was that individuals who contacted committee chairs with offers to help out on committees were never contacted back.

Some comments indicated that church communications were working well in some ways; much information is already available about church activities, committees and leadership. However, other comments indicated this information was not reaching all individuals. Use of a greater variety of communication channels (e.g., having a public Facebook page, as the UUA and some other UU churches do – rather than a “closed group” on Facebook – so that posting of UUCP events are automatically posted on users’ “timelines”) and a broader variety of media (e.g., printed -- not just electronic, computer-based) might enhance church information-sharing. A number of respondents noted that, while much information is provided via the newsletter, they (and likely other people) don’t read it online; the suggestion was made that, given its importance as an information source, the newsletter’s use might be promoted in other ways, such as making copies available in the foyer.

Many respondents commented on the UUCP’s widespread presence in the larger Palouse community. They clearly value the church’s visibility as a progressive voice in the community and its active involvement in it, including inter-faith programs such as Family Promise, pagan events, and the Mormon Community Christmas Concert. Of particular note was the church’s advocacy for social justice through activities of the UUCP Social Justice Committee and church participation in related events (e.g., the Women’s March, LGBT events, March For Our Lives, etc.). Also mentioned were the church’s philanthropic contributions (particularly the Month of Sunday offeratory fund-raising) and its involvement in environmental issues (e.g., the UUCP Environmental Task Force) and sustainability efforts (e.g., the Green Sanctuary program), and the Purple Paisley Group (one couple especially appreciated the quilt that the Purple Paisley Group made for their baby). The frequent use of the church for other organizations, services, and events -- including the Mindfulness Sanga, bridge groups, the Paradise Ridge Defense Coalition, vigils, and memorial services – also was mentioned.

Other valued social gatherings are the church’s Service Auction, Circle Suppers and game nights, despite the concern of some over seeming declines in participation in these as well as in recent snow retreats and the discontinuation of the annual raft trip. The UUCP’s Small Group Ministry program, with its inclusion of “non-UUs” as participants, serves an important function in the larger community, raising calls for its expansion. One response to this has been the recent organization of a Women’s Group, similar to the two Men’s Groups already serving needs for gender-based sharing and

relationship building. Participation in other groups focused on special kinds of people were mentioned, including the Wholly Crones, Retirees Luncheon, Refuge Recovery, and Grief Support groups.

However, despite all the congregation's current activities and programs and a number of comments suggesting that, if anything, the church and congregation might be spread too thin in its programs and activities, some respondents commented that the church could be working in other areas as well; some noted specific concerns or areas where the church might do better. There were a number of calls for more events, including inter-faith activities (e.g., pulpit exchanges, including with the Muslim community), and for efforts to reach out to a more diverse population across all Palouse communities -- especially younger adults and conservatives (even evangelistic churches like Christ Church).

One person asserted that the UUCP should stand up for what is considered important, but also be willing to listen to other people. The church "used to have Republicans as members," and "some past members no longer come because they are no longer comfortable." Other comments were that "everyone frowns on... [some members of evangelical churches], but perhaps we could benefit from learning more from Christ Church[, for example], getting to know them as people and realizing they're not all crazy." "Just because we don't agree about religious things doesn't mean we have to do shouldn't have to do anything with them; we should step out of our comfort zone." One person asserted that "the UUCP falls short on self-criticism; it is in denial about its diversity: Where are the conservatives? Shouting outrage at perceived injustice isn't enough;" efforts are needed for "training people for leadership' roles and to promote a culture of supporting them."

Concern about needed improvements in the church infrastructure and technology was widespread. The adequacy of the current church facilities for the growing variety of church program and activities was mentioned by many people -- in particular, having improved, adequate disability access. (Safety egress was also mentioned by a few people). Some people were concerned about having adequate space in the church buildings to accommodate ongoing and future growth in Sunday service and RE attendance, as well as in the number and variety of church programs. (The church tried having two morning services some time ago, but this arrangement did not work, given the complications posed

for the RE and Music Programs.) Some people were specifically concerned that the church leadership had not moved forward more promptly with the facilities planning process.

There also was widespread concern about technological improvements needed for services – such as a simpler, more effective sound system and its management – especially the need for before-service sound-checks and improved technology (e.g., blue-tooth) for the hard-of-hearing. Some mentioned the need for more hymnals and more comfortable chairs, as well as some kind of communication about the availability of large-print hymnals.

Some tensions were exposed by responses. Although many people expressed satisfaction with the Sunday services, which are generally perceived as “non-dogmatic” and often enlightening (“I always learn something I hadn’t known or thought about”), some respondents would prefer more “intellectual” content in sermons that focus on humanist themes and topics. One specific comment was the desire for sermons that interweave the symbolism and meaning of other religious traditions (Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Buddhist, etc.) with UU principles and concerns.

Many people commented on their appreciation of the personal or spiritual growth that the sermons promote. They appreciate the focus of services on being constructive and even inspirational in providing helpful, positive, thought-provoking suggestions for becoming healthier and more whole individuals through community. People come away from church services feeling comforted and uplifted with a “way-forward in difficult times.” A number of people specifically mentioned that they liked the diversity of service topics and range of people involved.

That said, people differed in their perceptions and personal needs *viv a vis* service topics and sermons. A significant number of people would like more 'spiritual' and 'heart-felt' content, while some people mentioned feeling that there was too much reference to "the political" in the services. Likewise, while some like the occasional focus on empathy and inclusiveness – the acknowledgement of human “brokenness and suffering” – others felt services could be too focused on this, too “touchy-feely,” and even “too weepy.”

Nonetheless, in addition to sermons, some people specifically appreciate Joys and Concerns as they are now. However, a number of people commented that services are too long: sermons could be shorter, somehow speeding up Joys and Concerns (e. g., the service leader just reads written statements), and circumventing people sometimes talking too long. Similarly, one person suggested that there could be fewer spoken words included in the meditation segment of the service. One person did not favor services involving interaction with other attendees (small group activities) or having to juggle paper and pens to write down things.

About as many people want monitors in the sanctuary as don't, although a qualification some made was that monitors would be OK if used judiciously, in a way that was not distracting (e.g., used solely for display of written words to be said or sung – the words of songs, the words of affirmation, the words of the children's exit song, and the closing words; some were concerned that the display of pictures generally would be distracting, and particularly during the children's story – especially for the children).

A number of respondents called for consideration of a new building, perhaps located on the Moscow-Pullman Highway for improved convenience of Pullman church members; a larger church building could accommodate growth over the next couple of decades, with a larger sanctuary and space for more parking. Some people perceive that the UUCP has become mostly Moscow dominated and not as welcoming for Pullman folks as it might be; it is difficult for nonresidents of Moscow when all activities are in Moscow and in the evening. This can especially be the case for the nonresidents with children; one comment was that "we would like to be more involved with families with kids who are our daughter's age, but many are in Moscow, so we can't get together as readily and are not included." The need for more events in Pullman was a concern of some people – perhaps even a "branch church" could hold services there.

Other people emphasized their desire to retain the church in its current central Moscow location as an in-filling/in-town site. Some desire to retain the existing church building, especially valuing the sanctuary for its heritage and as a sacred space and "peaceful refuge." They value the sanctuary's spiritual ambiance, tasteful aesthetic furnishings, and its inclusion of architectural touches of the

original Lutheran church reflecting its Judeo-ian tradition (e.g., arched windows, symbolic light fixtures, etc.).

Overall, people felt good about the church and its progress moving forward. Several old-timers noted that it is now doing much more practicing what it preaches than it did in the fellowship's early years, and that the range and diversity of the church's programs, activities, member participation, and community contributions are much greater than 20 years ago. There seems to be a consensus among old-timers that the church is the best it's ever been.

Similarly, feedback about the Census and the interview process was generally positive, with a number of people commenting that they appreciated being asked for input. A number of comments were that, like the Discernment Dinners some people also mentioned, it was good for the church to be gathering this kind of input, and that the UUCP should consider doing it every few years. (One person noted it was the "first time...[they'd been] asked for this kind of input by a church!") At least one individual commented that an anonymous survey would elicit more sensitive feedback that people would not be uncomfortable with sharing if identified.

This report will now go to board and committee chairs, as well as being made available to everyone via the newsletter and a "Dessert and Discuss" conversation. A special effort needs to be made to follow up on the input the Census has provided, with a task force assigned to respond to the input and suggestions made.

On the one hand, change is hard, as it involves loss. On the other, change is inevitable. The hope is to continue changing in ways that enable the UUCP to better fulfill its mission.