

**Unitarian Universalist Community of Charlotte
Settled Minister Search Team
Report on Fall 2023 Congregational Survey**

Methodology:

The survey was conducted from September 13 to October 11, 2023. It was primarily completed online, although a .pdf form was also made available, and paper copies were distributed following Sunday services and offered by mail through the UUCC office.

The questionnaire was a modified version of the model provided by the UUA, which the Search Team shortened and adapted to our needs. The goal was to make it a 15-20 minute task to fill out, in an effort to maximize participation as well as to gather actionable information.

Most questions on the form were multiple choice, including demographic questions such as age, gender, number of children, and years of membership in the congregation. Several questions asked for a written response. There was space to list the respondent's name, but that and all responses were optional.

The survey was sent by email or on paper to all members, friends of UUCC (including visitors on record) and staff. Reminders were sent via email, through our weekly newsletter, and on our website and social media; weekly announcements were made at Sunday services during the survey period.

We received 210 responses, which was about a 40% response rate. Of those who returned the survey, 81.6% were over 50 years of age, 65.1% have been UUCC members for more than 10 years, and 78.8% for more than 5 years. Women represented 63.2% of the survey group. We believe that women and seniors were over-represented in the sample, though the makeup of our congregation certainly skews toward those demographics.

Findings:

The analysis of the survey indicates that, although the survey sampled only part of the congregation, it is likely that the majority of members joined UUCC since Rev. Jay Leach became its senior minister 20 years ago. His impact on the community is a filter through which much of the

data can be interpreted. He set high standards for worship, religious education, administration, pastoral care, social justice work, and visible leadership in the community. This likely was responsible for attracting and retaining members over his tenure.

Rev. Eve Stevens, who arrived under contract in 2018, quickly gained a reputation for her preaching skills, involvement in UUCC life, and work in family ministry. Her departure in the immediate wake of the Covid shutdown not only left a void in our ministry. It removed the possibility that she might succeed Jay Leach as our next called minister.

It's been about a year and a half since those events unfolded, but their impact is still being felt. Our interim minister, Rev. Lisa Bovee-Kemper, has worked diligently with our Transition Team to help prepare us for future ministry. But the survey – and the subsequent feedback sessions and focus groups conducted by the Search Team – show that our UU community is eager for new, more permanent leadership in ministry.

The survey also shows that ministry is just one element of what holds our community together. When members were asked what they value most about our congregation, the most popular answers cited were: community, personal connections, UU values and spirituality. Sunday services, social justice work, and our music program were next in the rankings of things most valued.

Attendance at Sunday services is the most popular single activity cited in the survey. We should also note that attendance is down significantly since Covid restrictions eased and two ministers departed. Although adapting to changes has been difficult, the survey shows that members are open to further change – and largely supportive of our Mission and Vision.

The level of trust in leadership question in the survey clearly shows room for improvement, but it is decidedly more positive than negative. Where the survey shows we struggle most is in the area of “having difficult conversations and staying in relationship.” Recent internal controversies have shown there are rifts in the congregation over the current direction of Unitarian Universalism writ large. And our next minister will find that healing divisions, conflict resolution, and fostering a greater sense of community are congregational priorities.

Another significant finding of the survey is that members expressed a strong degree of commitment to “shared ministry, where every member

has responsibility for fulfilling the UUCC Mission and Vision and plays an active role, giving of their time, talent, and resources.” More than 83% also said it was important that our minister be deeply grounded and educated in Unitarian Universalism.

Our highly capable and experienced staff has been reduced in size in recent years, but their workload, for a variety of reasons, has not eased. The congregation appreciates their efforts and their value. Our next minister can be encouraged that a core of longtime members are willing to shoulder more responsibility for the work of our community.

A comment from a new member who filled out the survey stands out to the Search Team as both insightful and hopeful about UUCC’s future:

“I value UUCC's strong and committed staff and volunteers. They provide excellent Sunday services, educational programming, and apparently good committee functioning. There is clearly also a strong sense of personal ownership (of UUCC) by the members. As a new member, still discovering my new church and my place in the UUCC community and its complex systems of service and program and leadership, these strengths give me confidence in the resilience of my new congregation and in its future.”

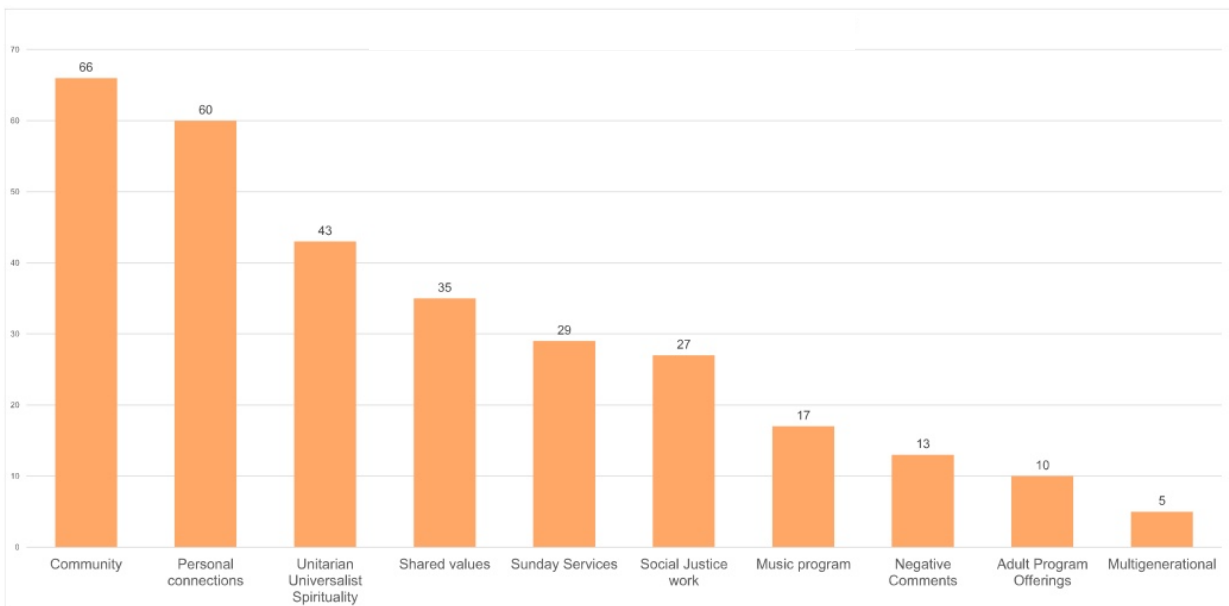
On the following pages, we summarize the results of the survey questions with text and graphs. The last 4 of the 29 questions are not summarized. The Search Team found that they added very little additional information that would impact the usefulness of the survey.

Question 1: What do you value most about our congregation?

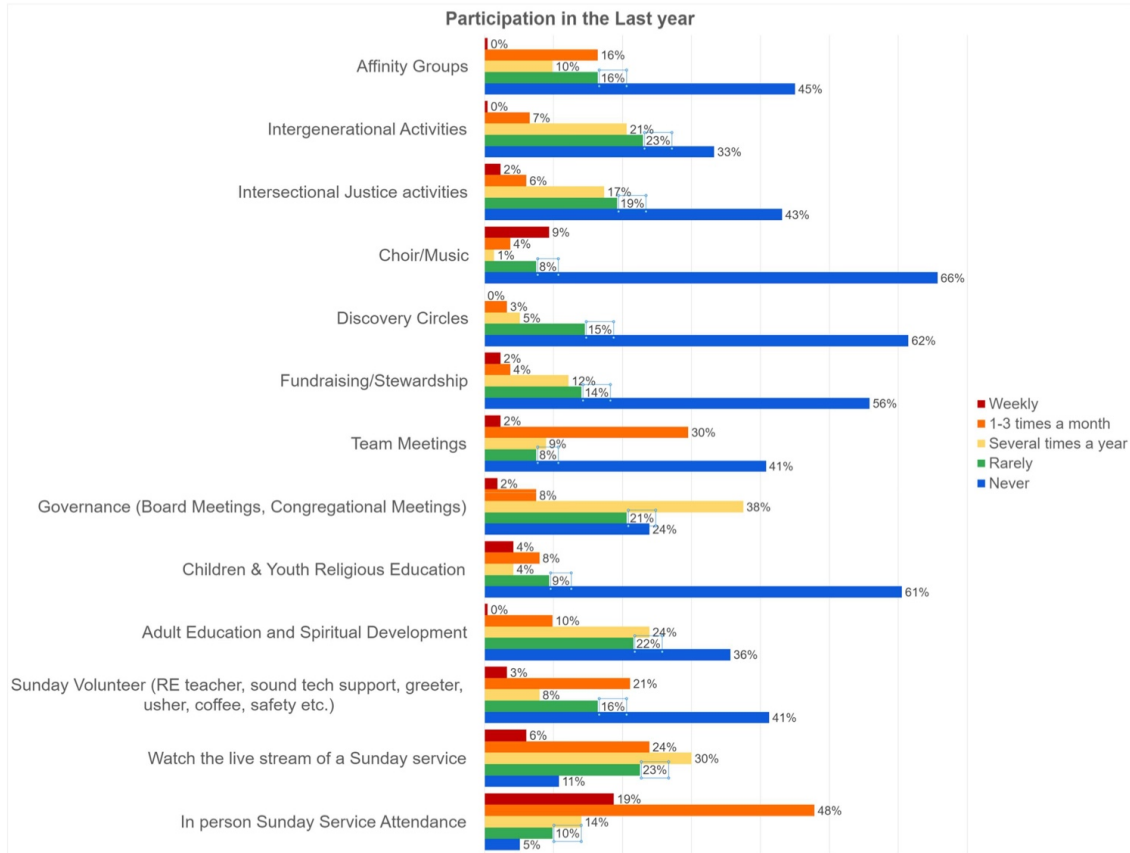
The first question in the survey was open-ended: "What do you value most about our congregation?" Most respondents (about 85%) answered with a few words or a single sentence. To analyze the data, the Minister Search Team sorted the responses into ten categories that represent the themes cited.

Each mention of something valued, e.g. community, Sunday services, or social justice work, was counted once. So most individuals' responses appeared in multiple categories.

Several members answered the "what do you value most" question with something they disliked. The Team considered those to be significant, although they were not responsive to the question. Thirteen of 210 respondents had at least a partially negative comment. The most common among them was a perception that our "sense of community" has been diminished due to recent controversies.



Question 2: On average, how often did you participate in the following activities during the last year?



Looking back over the programs, ministries, and activities listed in the previous question, please choose one (or two at the most) programs for your responses to the following questions:

Question 3: Which 1 or 2 programs, ministries, or activities are most valuable to you in your spiritual journey?

The responses to this question and question 4 give us a more detailed picture of the information gathered in question 1. As expected, Sunday services were cited by about half the respondents. Next on the list were adult religious education/spiritual development activities. Several members said they have not found those two activities as rewarding since the end of the pandemic. That appears to be connected to staff changes, reduced participation numbers, and diminished satisfaction with services and ARE/SD offerings.

It's also noteworthy that volunteer and participatory activities were cited as valuable to members' spiritual journeys as follows, in descending order:

- Teaching CYRE classes and leading other children/youth activities
- Membership in various affinity groups
- Social justice and other intersectional justice programs
- Participation in music programs
- Being part of Discovery Circles

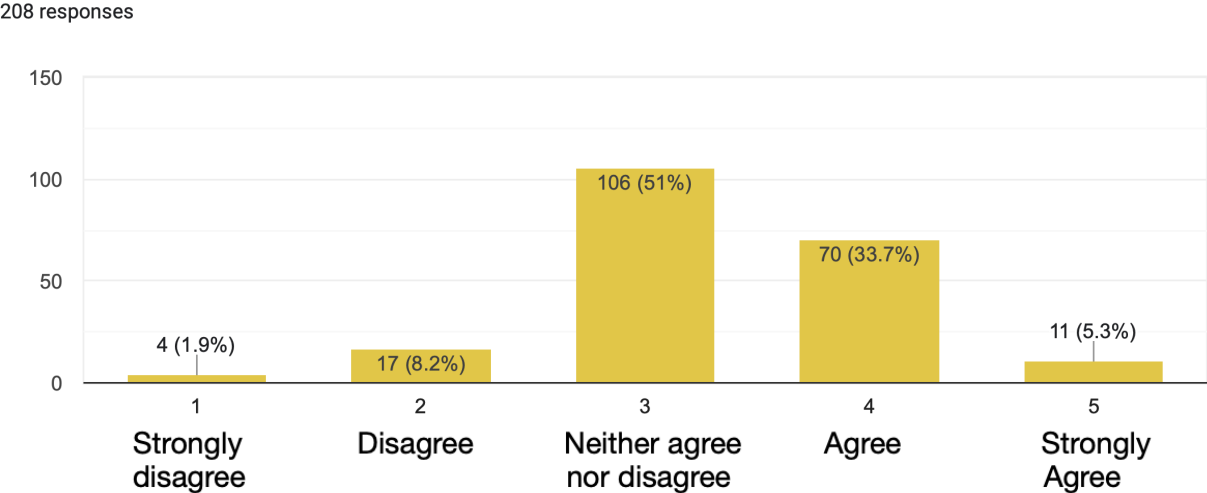
We analyzed the demographics on this question, and found that members were more likely to prioritize programs and activities based on their age or stage of life. For example, older members tended to cite attendance at Sunday services, while younger members – those more likely to have children – named activities such as CYRE more frequently.

Question 4: Which 1 or 2 programs, ministries, or activities gives you the deepest sense of community?

Although this question was distinct from question 3, the responses were fairly similar and did not add a lot of additional information about the value of various programs, ministries and activities to our members. The major difference was that Sunday coffee hours, potlucks, community-building activities such as game nights, volunteering on teams and on Sundays, and the social aspects of affinity groups were cited as contributing to the sense of community.

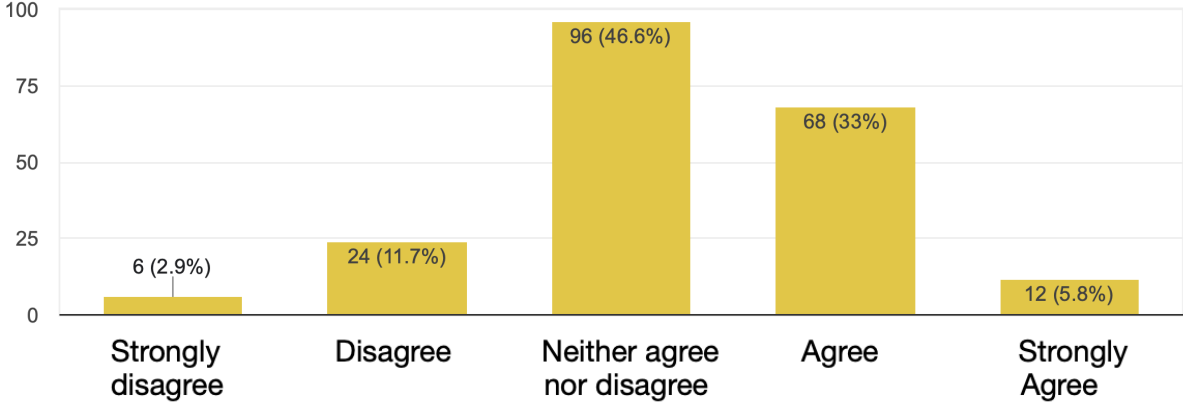
Several questions on the survey called for a numerical response on a sliding scale. If you answered 1, that meant you “strongly disagree,” 3 was “neither agree nor disagree,” while 5 meant “strongly agree.”

Question 5: This congregation is generally open to change.



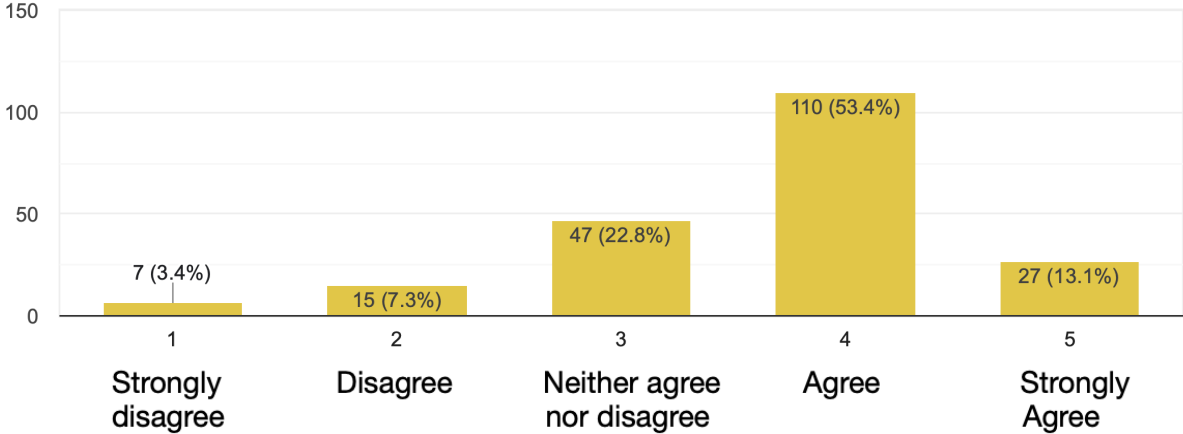
Question 6: The UUCC has a flexible enough structure to implement new ideas easily.

206 responses



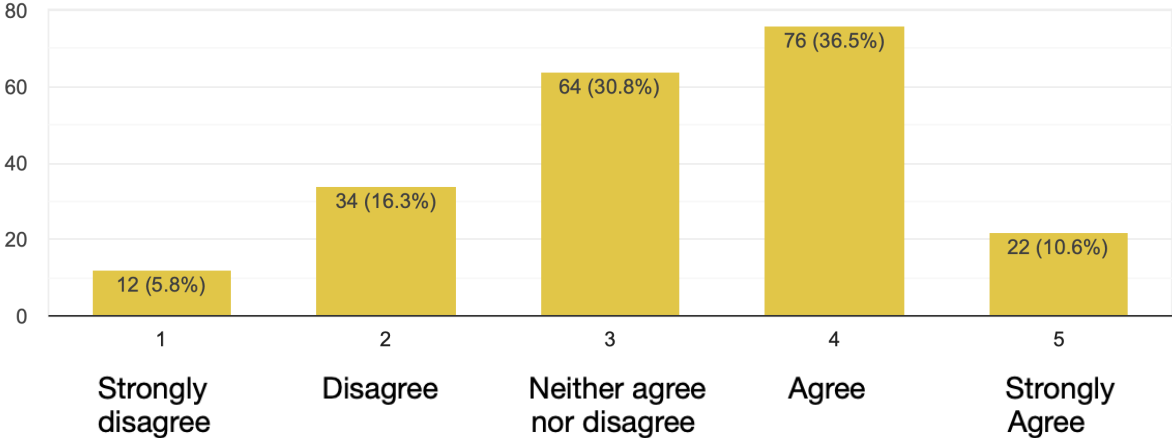
Question 7: This community focuses on mission and vision, rather than individual preferences.

206 responses



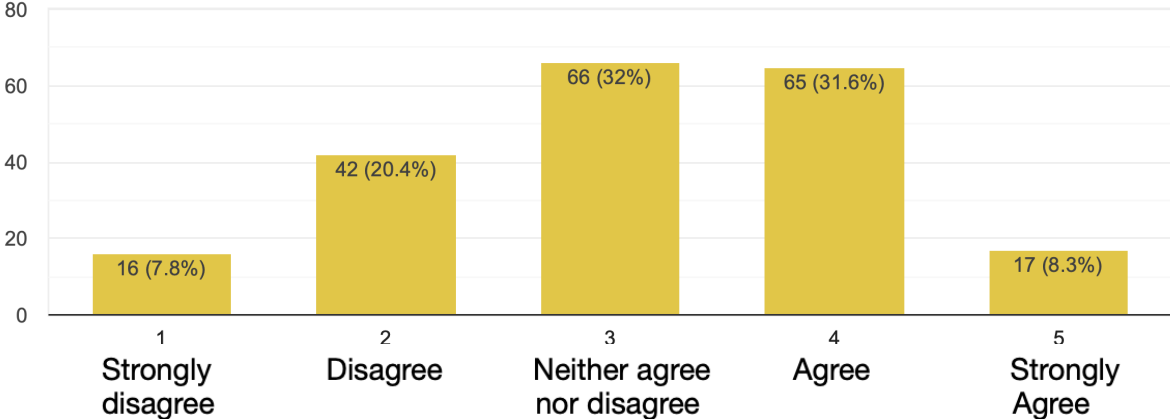
Question 8: There is a high level of trust in leadership in this conareaation.

208 responses



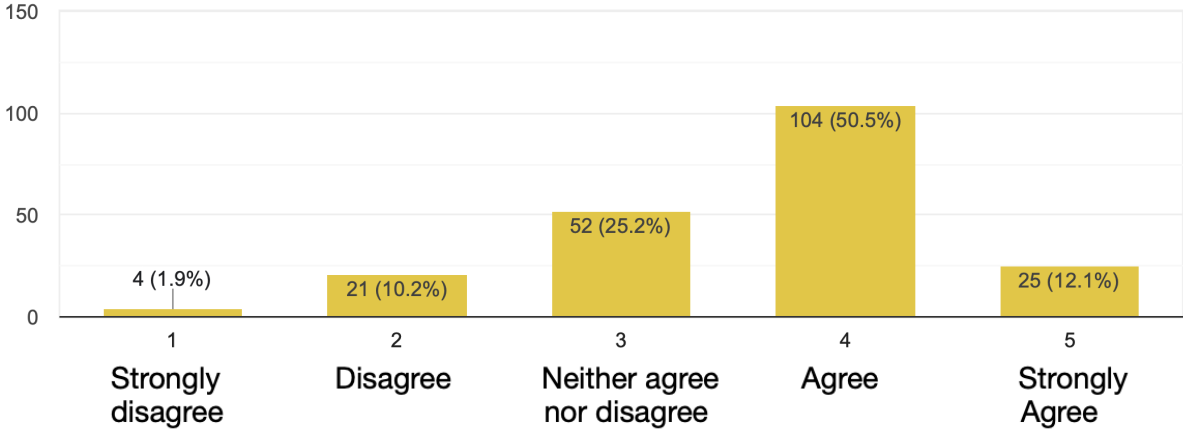
Question 9: We do a good job of having difficult conversations and staying in relationship.

206 responses



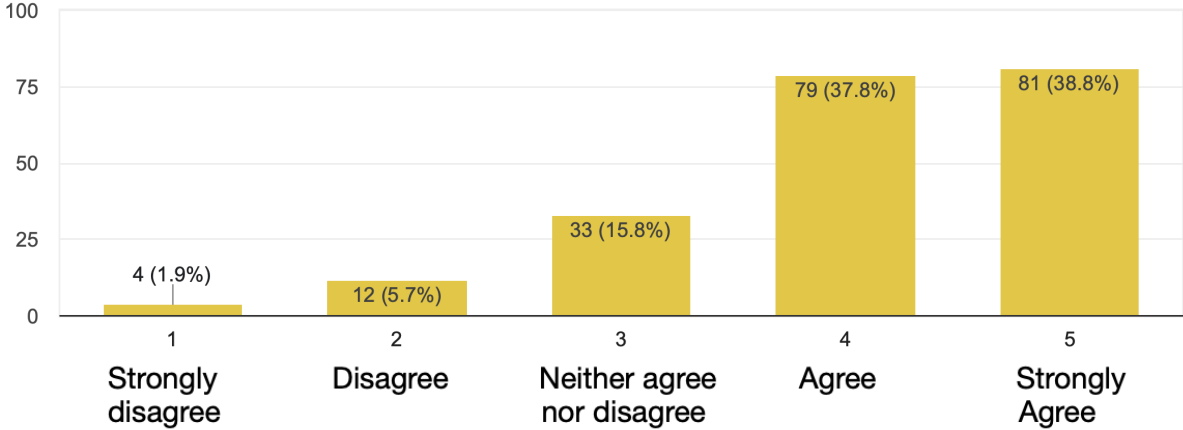
Question 10: Our mission and ministry continue to adapt to changing conditions in the world.

206 responses



Question 11: I am committed to participating in shared ministry, where every member has responsibility for fulfilling the UCC Mission and Vision and plays an active role, giving of their time, talent, and resources.

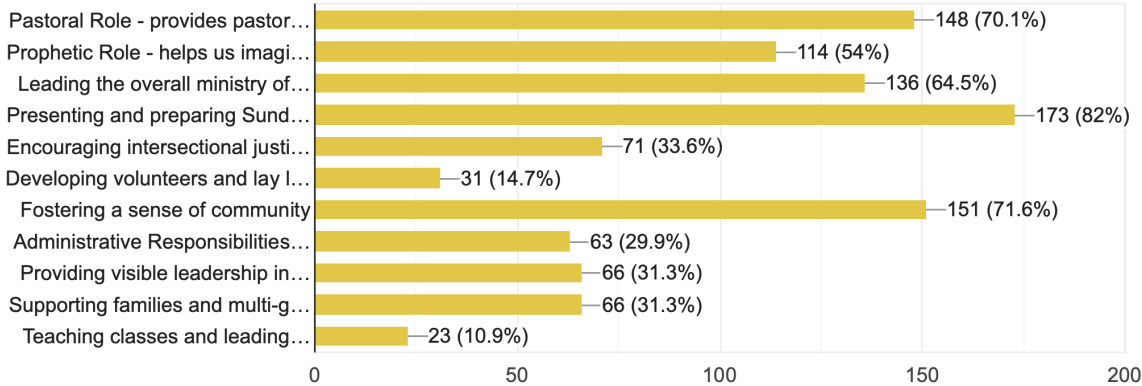
209 responses



Question 12: Consider the following roles of our future minister and their importance. Choose 5 roles that are most important to the congregation and its future.

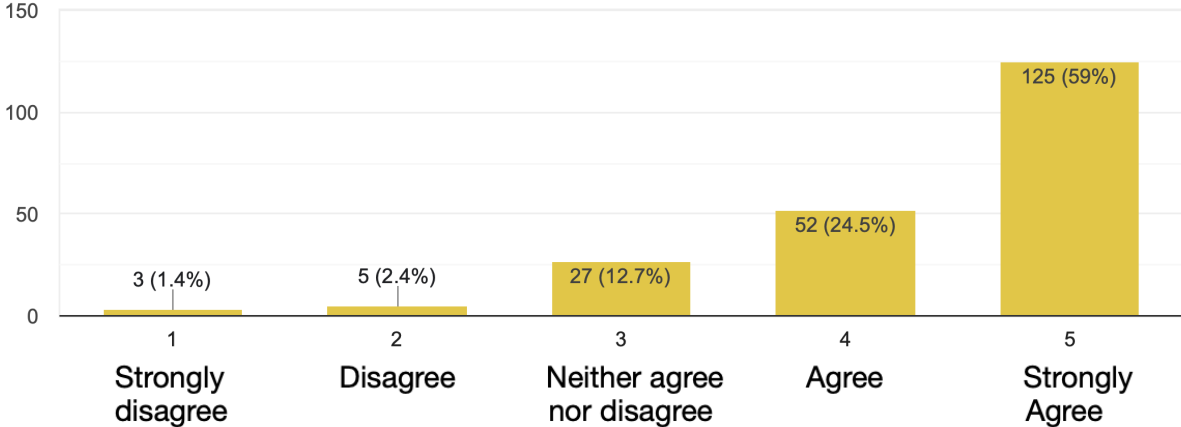
Consider the following roles of our future minister and their importance. Choose 5 roles that are most important to the congregation and its future.

211 responses



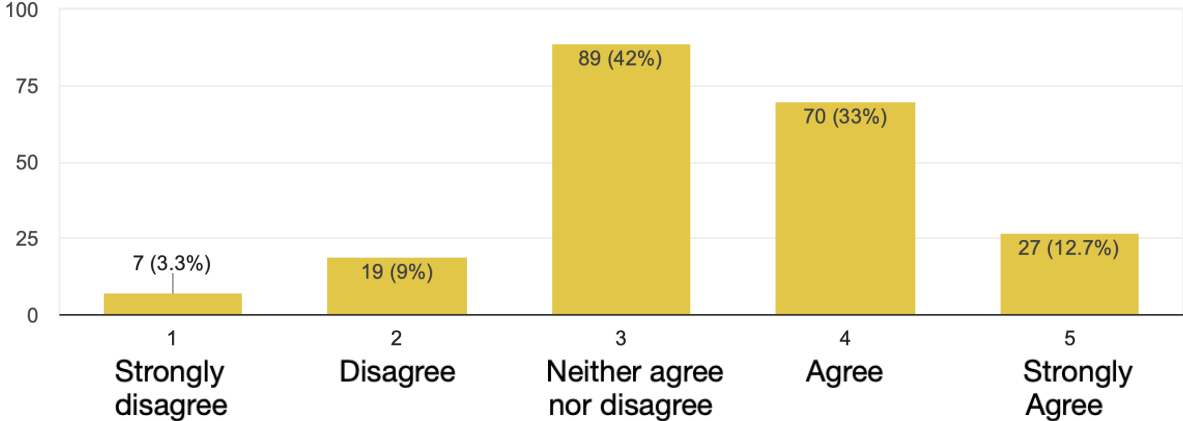
Question 13: How Important is it for the minister to be deeply grounded and educated in Unitarian Universalism?

212 responses



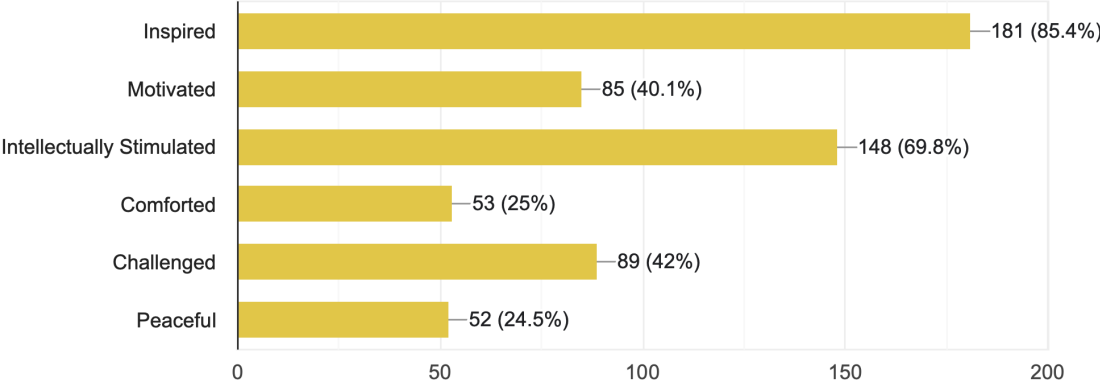
Question 14: How important is it that you have a personal relationship with the minister?

212 responses



Question 15: How do you want to feel after a Sunday service? Choose your top 3 selections.

212 responses



Question 16: It could be controversial if the new minister tried to change:

Sunday worship services:

This open-ended question drew a wide variety of responses, but the concerns cited most often center on our services. It's not always clear if members are expressing a view that the point of controversy is something that they want changed, or if they are merely saying that other people would not want it changed.

Despite that, it's clear that if a new minister were to make major changes in the music program, or remove John Herrick as Director of Music, that would have a major impact on the congregation. As one member put it, "If they touched the music, I'd quit!"

An equal number of responses said changes to the service format would be controversial. But, separately, six said controversy would arise if our services became more Christian in orientation, while five said it would be controversial if a new minister made the services less religious, i.e., more secular.

To elaborate on that point, there is longstanding disagreement in our UU community between humanists who would remove all "God language" and religious trappings from our services, and those who favor more formal rituals similar to those of mainline Protestant denominations.

Relationship with UUA:

Another significant potential point of controversy for our next minister will be our relationship to the UUA and proposed changes to Article 2 of the UUA Bylaws. Several respondents wrote to support our affiliation with the UUA, but it's not clear if they favor the Bylaw amendment. A slightly smaller number said that eliminating the Seven Principles was a potentially fraught issue for the new minister.

Anti-racism efforts:

The other significant issue that drew several comments is anti-racism, anti-oppression work at the UUA and our UUCC social justice work. In the survey and in our feedback and focus groups, we found many members who want to be sure we continue, or grow, our efforts in this area. Some other members – it's hard to judge their numbers, but they tend to be older

– objected to Rev. Leach’s approach to intersectional justice, finding it too extreme.

As one member wrote, it would be controversial for the new minister to turn “UCC into anti-racist social justice warriors sworn to and accountable to dismantling all white supremacy culture within our congregation and denomination.”

UCC Staff:

Finally, there were several general expressions of confidence in what one member called “our great UCC staff.”

Question 17: It could be unifying and energizing if the new minister tried to change:

How UUCC deals with internal conflict:

This issue was by far the most mentioned in the open-ended question part of the survey. The concerns apparently stem from controversies during the past year over proposed changes in both the UUA and the UUCC Bylaws. Our Board of Trustees held two separate congregational meetings to vote on these amendments. The congregation supported continuing discussion on Article 2 of the UUA bylaws by a more than 60% vote. And by an 89%-11% vote, our members defeated a proposed change in the UUCC Bylaws to remove the requirement that our ministers all be in fellowship with the UUA.

As a result of the controversies, some hard feelings linger. As one member wrote in the survey, the new minister should work to change the “current divisiveness that some members have fostered. There is enough division that occurs outside UUCC's walls on a local, state, and federal level. It would be unifying and energizing if the new minister could find a way to encourage members to respect one another's viewpoint but leave divisive actions and disrespectful tones and attitudes outside our walls.”

Role of the Settled Minister:

Another issue several members said they favored changing is the authority of the called minister. Our 19-year history with Rev. Leach is viewed negatively in this aspect. Some members wrote that there needs to be more transparency and collaboration in the affairs of the UUCC. As one member wrote, the new minister should change “our approach to congregational leadership. We are used to a strong top-down model from the minister (which has its benefits). But empowering lay leaders could relieve some of the burden on staff and stimulate creativity from the congregation.”

Emphasis on social justice/intersectional justice work:

As mentioned in the discussion on question 16, UUCC's justice work does not have unanimous support. But more than ten responses to this question cited a renewed effort in this area as one that a new minister would be well advised to pursue.

Community connections:

On a related subject, almost as many members suggested that expanding our outreach to the larger community – including interfaith initiatives – as a positive step our next minister could take. This would be in the spirit of part of our Mission statement that includes the words “cultivate courageous connections.”

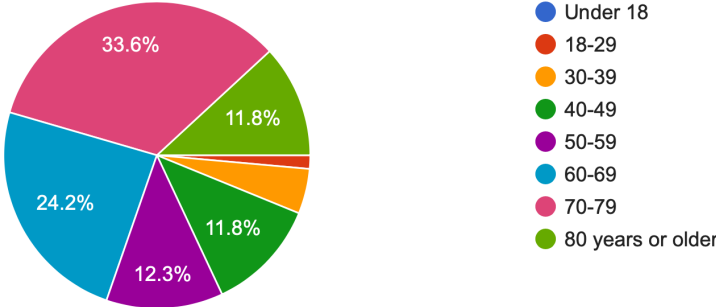
Multigenerational activities:

Finally, there was a significant number of mentions of including children more in our Sunday services, and the priority our new Director of Lifespan Religious Education places on intergenerational programs.

Questions 18-25: Demographics

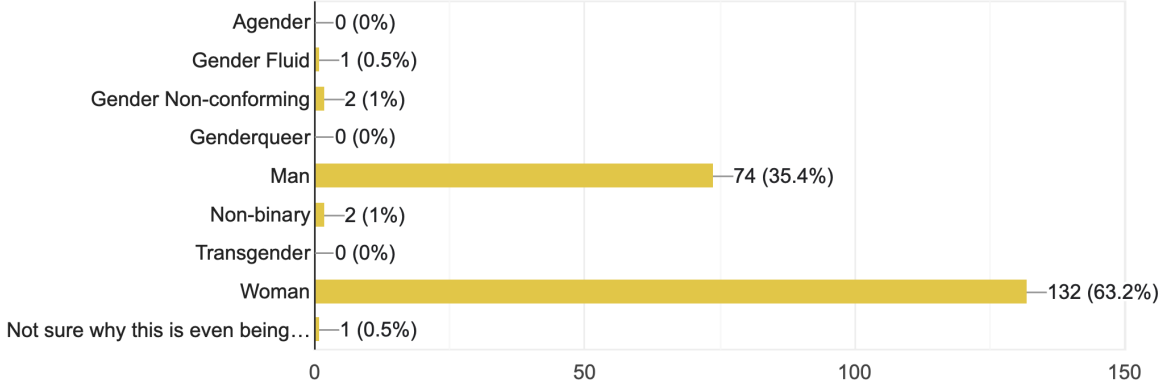
What is your age?

211 responses



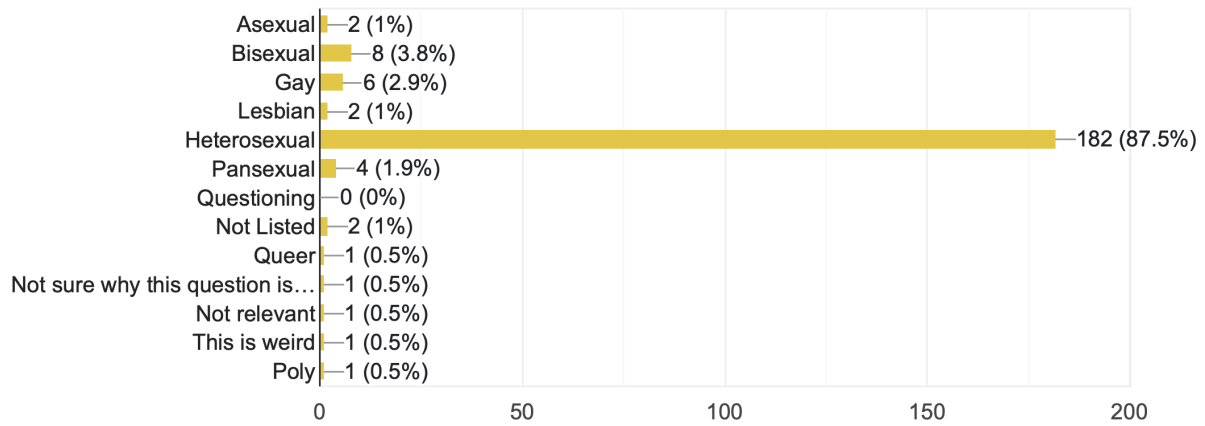
Which of the following best describes your gender? Please check all that apply

209 responses



Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? Please check all that apply

208 responses



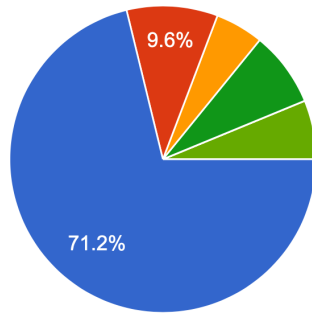
How many children under the age of 18 are there in your family? If other adult family members are filling out a form, too, please choose one family member to count the children.

211 responses



If you have children under the age of 18 in your family, how many are currently participating in the Religious Education program at the UCC? Again, if other adult family members are filling out a form, too, please choose one family member to answer this question.

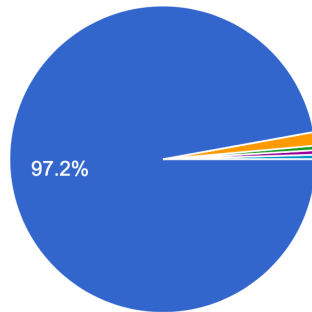
177 responses



- No children under the age of 18
- None
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5 or more
- Another family member is answering this question.

What is your relationship to the UCC?

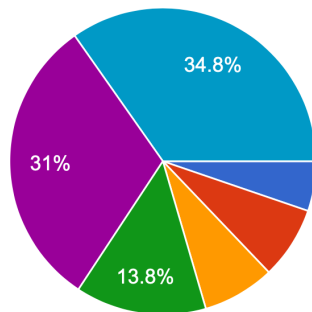
211 responses



- Member
- Visitor
- Staff
- Visitor pondering membership
- Staff and member
- Staff and Member

How long have you attended the UCC?

210 responses



- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 3-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10-20 years
- More than 20 years

How many years have you been a Unitarian Universalist?

212 responses

