

**Unitarian Universalist Community of Charlotte  
Settled Minister Search Team  
Report on Fall 2023 Feedback and Focus Groups**

**Methodology:**

Approximately 120 UUCC members and youth participated in face-to-face meetings with members of the Minister Search Team in October and early November. The feedback sessions were open to everyone in the congregation and lasted about 60-75 minutes. Four were held in-person and one on Zoom. We asked for responses to two questions:

- 1. Describe our congregation for the benefit of prospective minister candidates***
- 2. Looking back after our minister has been with us for a year, what will be your measure of success?***

The focus groups consisted of several smaller gatherings of stakeholders, including present and past members of our Board of Trustees, CYRE parents, children and youth, our Music Team, new members, and leaders and members of some of our Affinity Groups (e.g., seniors, humanists, walking group, Luna Rising).

The focus groups followed essentially the same format as the feedback groups. They were asked the same questions, in addition to any concerns about the search process that might be particular to their special interests.

Were the participants representative of the entire congregation? Likely not, because attendance was voluntary, so the groups were essentially self-selected. But the Search Team believes we received a broad range of opinions from many of the most active and concerned members of our community.

**Findings:**

In 2022 our congregation experienced the end of two years of Covid separation, followed quickly by the departure of both ministers over a span of just three months. Our community was distressed and grieving. We still

are recovering from the impact of the pandemic and a deep sense of loss. Nevertheless, our community is pressing on.

Our feedback and focus groups reflected a determination by many members to remain in relationship with one another. Many expressed a commitment to work through conflicts that have emerged since the wrenching events of last year.

We remain a UU community eager for intellectual stimulation and spiritual growth. We say we are open to change and to new approaches to ministry. And we very much want new and dynamic leadership. Success will look like being welcoming to all, and the congregation feeling a genuine connection to the minister.

***Question 1: “Describe our congregation for the benefit of prospective minister candidates.”***

Four themes stand out from the discussions: Membership trends, feelings of loss and disappointment, tensions due to ministerial changes and recent UUA and UUCB Bylaws controversies, and strengths our community can build on.

Membership trends:

- Both membership and weekly attendance have fallen since the end of the pandemic and the ministers’ departure
- Our congregation now appears to skew older, and the pre-Covid trend of declining CYRE participation still has an impact
- A recent influx of new members, including families with children
- Optimism that our new Director of Lifespan Religious Education will inject fresh energy into both adult and children/youth RE

Feelings of loss and disappointment:

- Social justice initiatives begun under Rev. Leach have suffered setbacks both from his departure and due to the pandemic
- Distractions to our Mission and Vision and disruptions due to Covid, staff departures, and recent controversies have left some members feeling neglected or unheard
- Some members have felt frustration that they were not told the full story behind the ministers’ departures

### Tensions due to changes and controversies:

- Adjusting to the new normal after the pandemic has caused anxiety for some that UUCC has not returned to the pre-Covid attendance numbers
- Replacing two tenured ministers with an interim minister has also led to concern over our ability to provide pastoral care
- Controversy over proposed new UUA Bylaw Article 2 has upset members strongly attached to the Seven Principles
- Internal division over a 2023 petition to change the UUCC Bylaws to eliminate the requirement for ministers to be in fellowship with the UUA left wounds that are still healing
- Congregational leaders made well-publicized efforts to foster dialogue over the Bylaws controversies, but overall the community struggles to have uncomfortable conversations over these and other contentious issues

### Strengths to build on:

- While adjusting to change has felt threatening to some members, others find opportunity in UUCC's prospects for growth and renewal with a new settled minister
- The congregation is not culturally diverse, but many see potential for the future as we reinvigorate youth programs and attract younger families
- Connection to community is what many seek here, and there is a desire for more small group activities that are fun, share food and fellowship
- An array of affinity groups and adult educational opportunities can enhance the sense of community among both current and new members
- The music program remains vital and a central part of worship

### Sample verbatim responses to Question 1:

Feedback group: "We are struggling between keeping the thought-oriented vs. (those who favor) action-oriented."

Feedback group: "We are at the point—where do we go now? We skew a little older. We need to move forward to get more younger people."

Feedback group: “We are guided by the UUA. (Some members) fear that we will be ruled by the UUA – that is a perception that we need to clarify.”

Feedback group: “There’s an undercurrent of fear and skepticism – people are wondering if things will go the way they want it to go.”

Feedback group: “We need help learning to constructively engage in uncomfortable spaces and challenging conversations. We don’t tend to be good at that.”

Feedback group: “I would like for the minister to unashamedly voice humanist values.”

Feedback group: “We have such an exceptional staff...a lot of good talented people who are so helpful and have good institutional knowledge.”

Board of Trustees: “The energy of this board is hugely different from last year’s board. We’re breaking off the shackles of executive decisions being made... Not feeling silenced in meetings.”

Parents of children/youth: “We come to give our kids the community they couldn’t find elsewhere.”

Feedback group: “We are starting to make great progress in building intergenerational interactions.”

New Members: “All new members are desiring to build relationships. After the pandemic we need the connection.”

Music team: “Music is something that unites us all.”

Feedback group: “The music is really important. Don’t mess with it.”

***Question 2: “Looking back after our minister has been with us for a year, what will be your measure of success?”***

Responses to this question generally follow four themes: numerical growth, healing from loss and controversy, community building, and Mission and Vision-driven work (social justice, adult and youth programs, spiritual development)

### Numerical growth:

- Look at hard measures of success such as people in the pews and online streaming, pledges, more younger families
- Work toward increased membership and pledges to allow hiring second minister
- Want to see the new minister being welcoming to all
- Members who have left or been absent return with enthusiasm
- Minister encourages increase in ARE/SD programs and participation

### Healing from loss and controversy:

- Minister prioritizes healing, bringing people together by listening
- Building trust through dialogue about issues of controversy
- Ensure members feel heard, valued, and supported even if they disagree with leadership
- More open, participatory decision-making

### Community building:

- New minister centers work toward Beloved Community
- Have more social activities that promote joy and fun
- Members more willing to volunteer, share in ministry
- Shared ministry improves sense of shared purpose
- Minister promotes leadership development to empower potential volunteer leaders

### Mission and Vision-driven work:

- We are more involved in social justice and the minister participates
- We are working on our identity centering on Mission and Vision
- New people feel like they have a purpose, a connection
- Minister presents varied, intellectually and spiritually challenging sermons
- We have a balance between social justice work and spiritual path exploration
- Sunday services create a feeling of inspiration and awe

### Sample verbatim responses to Question 2:

Feedback group: "I want to congratulate the (next) minister that the numbers are growing steadily."

Feedback group: “What happens in the pulpit is important to get people excited and involved. You can have the greatest ideas, but if you can’t present them nobody cares.”

Feedback group: “It is easy to want a new minister to be everything. I fall on the side of uplifting sermons. I want the community to be challenged... Call us spiritually. “

Feedback group: “What I want to see in a year is a real sense of hope and energy.”

Feedback group: “In a year I would like to see the relationships within the congregation get stronger, the trust grow stronger. I want to feel like this is the place that, when I am struggling, I can come here and there are people who will sit with me with that struggle, even if it is not their struggle.”

Feedback group: “I would love to see more opportunities to engage in ways that are purely social... community building activities.”

Children/Youth: “The new minister needs to have a sense of fun.”

Feedback group: “I would like the future minister to do work to keep young adults.”

Feedback group: “There’s a lot of hangover from the previous minister, but the new minister should be given a lot of leeway to do things differently.”

Feedback group: “I would like a truly living shared ministry. We all succeed when we can ALL invent the congregation.”

Feedback group: “We all add to the energy and we all work together – we are individuals but a part of the community and cannot imagine not being a part of the UUCC.”

Feedback group: “There needs to be a balance between the cerebral and spiritual.”

Feedback group: “I think our congregation is asleep. The congregation is older but starting to attract younger families, which is important. I think the congregation would connect with an activist minister... someone to wake us up.”

Feedback group: “If we have a strong identity... we won’t be able to make everyone happy. People will leave and we need to be okay with it, and (other) people are coming because of our work and mission.”