

DISCOVERY MEETING THEMES AND QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Author Mark Lau Branson, of Memories, Hopes and Conversations, writes that one of the **most remarkable “instruments” congregations possess in fostering a life-giving organization is conversation**. The power of group discovery not only stimulates the thinking and imagination of people, but lifts up the positive forces of thanksgiving and gratitude. It is in that vein that, as we close our discovery phase in UCS’ Strategic Planning process, we gratefully share with you our analysis of your responses.

The Strategic Planning team has spent the last month analyzing your comments and demographic data to **reveal interesting or surprising themes** which we will build upon in the dreaming phase of the planning process. Below is a summary of what has emerged thus far, and **some questions raised by these themes that we hope to explore as a congregation** in the next phase of the Strategic Planning process.

1. You care deeply about the community you find here.

Overwhelmingly, we heard that **community is one of your greatest benefits and joys as a member**. You have a deep yearning to develop meaningful relationships at UCS. We understand that for some of you it has been difficult to assimilate into this community, while others found themselves less connected than in the past, and you provided many suggestions to help improve the experience for yourself and others. Those of you who have been members for decades reflected back to us the **need to minister to members through life transitions and stages of life**. Your needs have changed in your time at UCS and having ministries available to support you along the journey is a priority.

What would you say has been valuable about your friendships at UCS? What would you say is most important in how we relate to each other? How did the strong relationships form? What helped create the space and opportunity for deeper connections between you and others you met in the community?

2. You are proud that we have an intentional focus on children and youth.

The number one answer you gave when you were asked to reflect on a time when you felt **most alive** in your time at UCS was teaching Religious Education (RE) or being involved with the youth. **The fact that we are a family-friendly congregation brought many of you to UCS in search of a religious home** in which to raise your children, and there is a desire to maintain and grow our RE program for children and youth.

What was it that made you feel most alive, prompted you to re-think your own values or bring up an issue you hadn’t considered? What is your role going to be in a growing RE program? What will be your role in the congregation as your children grow up and move away? How will you stay connected? Do we have a role, as a congregation, in

supporting families even if we have no children in the program ourselves? Ultimately, what would it look like for UCS to be truly intergenerational?

3. You aspire to grow in your spiritual journey.

Worship at UCS nourishes the mind and soul. You referred to the **sermons as complex, brimming with spiritual sustenance, and grounding. Our music program joyfully inspires you, and reminds you of the power and beauty in song.** We were struck by how often our new Adult Education program, Spirituality in Practice (SIP), was mentioned in Discovery Meetings. It was still an experiment and UCS was barely through the first SIP circle of the multi-session curriculum when we began the Strategic Planning discussions, but you nonetheless **voiced hope and optimism for a structured spiritual program** whereby people have a sense of where they are headed for the coming year.

What are you yearning for in your life right now? What role can and could the church play in speaking to that yearning and supporting you in this piece of your spiritual formation? What is your role or responsibility in making that happen? What are the cornerstones of adult formation spiritually as a Unitarian Universalist? What were/are they for you?

4. You desire more hands-on social action.

As a congregation we recognize that our definition of community extends beyond the walls of 4 Waldron Avenue. You held up Social Action as a valued feature of congregational life that has blossomed in the past 10 years, but you wanted to **get yourselves and your families more involved** in taking projects from idea formation through to implementation success.

When have you been involved in an experience relating to others beyond our church where you felt you made a real difference? What made it successful? How do we weave action into our shared life in ways that make it deepening, not just more activities to fit into our busy lives? How do we frame this work as a spiritual practice? Could mission trips or outreach partnerships become part of our life at UCS? What might those look like?

5. You feel grateful for our ministers and staff.

We are fortunate to have caring and highly competent ministers and staff, many of whom have long tenure with UCS.

How do we continue to support and challenge our quality staff? What do they require from us to flourish in their role? How does continuity of staff matter to your spiritual well-being? What is the staff's role in supporting congregants' work and ministries? Are we able to fulfill our dreams at this staffing level?

6. You recognize that we are at an important juncture, with our membership size and aspirations straining against the constraints of our physical space.

From your comments at more than 20 Discovery Meetings, it was clear that there is a strong affection for our building and location, and also the recognition that our space does not meet the needs of a congregation almost 500 members strong with ambitious aspirations. You struggle with the **desire to maintain intimacy and cohesiveness**, and the obligation, as some of you referred to it, to show courage, perseverance and love to be and do the things we talk about. Many of you prompted us to live out our greatness, play a bigger role in the denomination, and to **dream big, while not leaving anyone behind**. Some of you challenged us to increase our size and impact, but maintain our tight knit bonds; to have “**roots and wings.**” And no sooner were the Discovery Meetings over than one option presented itself in the sale of a neighboring property.

How will what happens with the Dangler property frame our discussion about space and making room for growth? What will the future require of us?

7. You are blessed with means to support our goals.

The self-reported demographic data from our adult sample of UCS participants shows that, on average, **participants are in good overall financial health and appear to have weathered the recession and housing crisis quite well**. Sixty-four percent of those surveyed responded that their financial health was ‘good’ or ‘very good’. Twenty-five percent responded that their financial health was ‘excellent’. This is a difficult question to analyze because everyone’s reference point of what constitutes “good” financial health will be different but **the general bias was toward health, rather than hardship**. Your generosity has been reflected in the congregation’s continual upward climb in funds you make available through Annual Giving, Social Action requests, and fundraising.

How do we continue to see gratitude and generosity as related and our good fortune as an opportunity? How will we talk about money and giving, especially among a people who can tend to fear authority and the power that greater institutional strength makes real? What can we make real and alive through our gifts of vision, hard work and financial support? What legacy will we leave behind that money, in part, makes possible?

8. There are natural tensions in your desires.

You desire **more diversity in the congregation yet you are highly appreciative of being in community with like-minded people with similar values**. While you’d like to be a highly diverse congregation with no barriers - race, economic class, and sexual orientation - you are aware that such diversity would bring with it a necessary adjustment to our patterns and behaviors. In addition, **we saw a political tension in your comments**. Several of you mentioned that you treasure that we are a progressive

voice in the larger religious community and world, but we wonder whether that might make religious progressives who are politically more conservative feel unwelcome.

Where is the political/religious line drawn? How do we maintain our center but open ourselves to be more sensitive to different beliefs and life circumstances and perspectives that stretch us?

If you are interested in reading our team's document summarizing the raw data on your comments in Discovery Meetings, please click [here](#). Also, please feel free share your thoughts with the congregation below in the comments section.

We look forward to rolling out the next phase in this adventure this winter. Join us on January 22nd from 12pm-1:30pm when we will present the next phase in the planning process.

What is your most audacious dream for UCS? Be sure to bring it.

Gratefully,

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