

Summary of participant feedback from "Who Are We Now?"

A Board of Trustees sponsored Community Conversation held on January 23, 2022

Introduction

Over 70 members and friends of FUUSB attended the Board's Community Conversation on Sunday, January 23rd at noon, via Zoom. After introductory remarks, attendees were split into 7 breakout rooms, with an assigned Board Member and volunteer note taker to record ideas presented in each group. After introductions all attendees were asked to respond to the question, "Who Are We Now?" or, restated in other words: Much has changed over the past two years. Have we also changed? What do we want to carry forward from this time into the future? Who Are We Now? Groups had close to a half hour to hear from each person and discuss before the full group reconvened for a report out from each group. A short, open question-and-answer period followed before the closing.

Notes from all seven of the breakout rooms were collected and then processed in the following manner. Each comment line was copied and pasted into a spreadsheet and then categorized. When a comment line consisted of several different thoughts/sentences, they were split into 2 or more lines, each with its own category. When this was complete the comments were sorted into over 20 different categories, including caring, coffee hour, feeling disconnected, radical welcoming, music, social justice, small group ministry, strengths, technology, wants connection, new members. After some time, and with the input of several individuals, nearly all of the comments seemed to fall nicely into the broader categories below. An additional group of comments that focused on desirable qualities in a new minister are not included here, but have been saved for a much later conversation.

FUUSB's Use of Technology

FUUSB's effective embrace of new technology during the pandemic has been a game changer. From video-recording to live-streaming, our Sunday services continue to be accessible to a much wider audience: to those who live or travel far away, to those who are nearby but can't leave home for one reason or another, and to those who need to be somewhere else on Sunday mornings. We have had overall greater participation and have attracted new members because of this. Video-recorded services were thoughtfully produced and extremely creative because of the efforts of all involved. The investment in good equipment for live-streaming has resulted in the high-quality broadcasting of live services with help from a dedicated team of cameramen/producers. We are grateful that we "have come into the 21st century with technology."

Connection and engagement through Zoom

Zoom has been a lifeline for many during the pandemic, allowing them to attend as many coffee hours, committee meetings, small groups, and larger meetings as they desired, including many who live too far away to attend in person. Online coffee hour, small group meetings and Vespers have provided a format where people listen while others speak, new people are easily included, and participants make and renew their connections, sharing as deeply as they want. Even people who disliked in-person coffee hour at the UU find Zoom coffee hour meaningful and fun. Zoom has helped many members stay engaged in the life of the community.

The downside of this technical approach is that it requires access to a computer and to the internet as well as a basic knowledge of how to use computers. This may leave some people behind. Additionally, for some, spending more time online was too much like being at work.

Feelings of disconnection, loss

Some Zoom participants are no longer feeling as connected as they did earlier in the pandemic. Some expressed concern that friends and/or other members have strayed or disconnected from FUUSB during the last two years. Some members feel a sense of sorrow or loss with the lack of physical presence of others. They miss having chance encounters or one on one meaningful conversations, seeing children, being in the room with the choir, listening to the organ, and attending intergenerational services in the Sanctuary. There is a strong desire to get back to in-person services and life in the Meeting House. However, others were reminded that being in the Meeting House would bring back the sense of splintering that they felt when coffee hour takes place in two locations, downstairs for families and upstairs for everyone else. Some members have been feeling a loss of energy due to the world situation and social stresses.

The importance of Social Justice work

Many are drawn to FUUSB because of its high level of engagement in justice work; some experience this as "soul work" (the connection between justice and spirit). There is agreement that more can be done. The climate crisis is a huge issue that should be in the forefront of what we consider doing. Social justice issues in Burlington, Vermont and elsewhere need attention. Racial Justice has been a major undertaking for a few years, this year with efforts to educate the congregation on the 8th principle.

Currently, the greatest amount of energy and enthusiasm lies in the idea of promoting "radical welcoming" in our Society, with the ultimate goal of having greater diversity (of many kinds) among our members and increased membership. Those promoting radical welcoming see our Society becoming more pluralistic, inclusive, open-minded. It means not just welcoming people into the Society but into dialog and making sure people here are open to listening. It means taking the risk of radically welcoming more people without knowing at the outset who we might become in that process. Radical welcoming is not just a membership committee commitment; it calls for everyone in the congregation to do their part.

Programming: Youth Group, Faith Development and Worship Services

Youth group programming has been amazing this year thanks to David Ruffin, attracting greater numbers of youth, potentially bringing in all ages of children and their parents, and boosting the health of our congregation. OWL is a critically important community service as well. The Faith Development program is coherent and dynamic. Involvement of children seems to have increased. Erika's & Margo's work on children's programming as well as their creative additions to services has been amazing. They have truly embraced the limitations placed by Covid. Outside programming, the Solstice Celebration in particular, was very well-received.

Under Rev. Tricia's guidance, worship is dynamic and well-supported by talented and thoughtful folks. Worship committee and others are heavily involved in the worship services in substantive ways, not just

doing readings. From the beginning, staff were tremendously supportive and adapted as needed to the changing mandates. The occasional inclusion of UUA performers is also appreciated. Vespers additionally garnered accolades. Comments about the music included people who felt it was outstanding, those who missed Wayne Schneider, and a few who wanted more variety: from early music to 21st century. Several mentioned that they enjoyed seeing the choir and the joy on the singers' faces.

FUUSB is strong and vibrant

We are a strong and healthy community. We are in a good place. We have a bright future. Our Society is fortunate to have the resources it needs: our own building, a good endowment, large membership, and strong and stable pledges. We have astounding leadership and staff, and an abundance of talented, skilled, and dedicated members. We have a wide variety of programs to attract and engage people. We have a lot to offer our community and Vermont and we can make a difference here. Under the leadership of our minister and staff our Society adapted nimbly to the pandemic with remarkable results. Clearly, our Society can be an incubator for new ideas and actions. Our faith, Unitarian Universalism, has so much to offer that the world truly needs.

Looking ahead...

When life in Burlington goes back to (near) normal, members would like to see both online and in-person options for attending services, meetings and some activities. Online coffee hour should be available for those who cannot get to the UU, and an option to join small, in-person sharing circles in the Meeting House should be available to those who prefer a format where they can deliberately connect with a group of people, some of whom they might not know.

Some would like to see collaborative ministry and worship services, and collaborative leadership to continue. Others would like to see more members become directly involved. Others expressed a desire for a "culture of care," taking care of each other outside our immediate circle of friends. How do we make sure that people feel appreciated? Some felt a need to find ways to connect old members with newcomers. It was agreed that strong programming for children and youth would help bring in younger families, to help us continue to be healthy and strong.

February 22, 2022

➤ Feel free to direct any questions or comments to:

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