

Summary of Staff Listening Sessions December 2021

The Ministerial Search Team held a series of staff Listening Sessions, to complement the sessions offered to congregants. We were specifically interested in learning about the different areas of work responsibility, what a new minister should know about each, what challenges they face, and what they hope for going forward. Some common themes emerged, but there also were specific ideas that merit separate mention. These are summarized in turn below.

Themes

- Collaboration and shared leadership is baked into the cake at Unity. Staff is accustomed to team work and shared responsibility. The change in ministry will be a good time to clarify and in some cases redefine accountability and communication.
- Unity has a culture of ambitious programming, overfunctioning, and unstated perfectionism. We need to learn to manage expectations - our own, and those of the congregation. Unity has a tendency to “bend toward yes,” to take on new things without planning for who is responsible. Staff members have lots of energy, but need to focus on what’s most important and set priorities.
- There is a desire to involve the congregation more in some of the work, to tap into their energy and capacity, instead of expecting staff to keep adding to the work they do. If we think of this as sharing leadership, ministers and staff have to be ready for things to go in a direction they didn’t have in mind, ready to let go of some of the control and be open to learning.
- Communication is critical. Staff would benefit from clarification of roles, lines of communication, and accountability. Working remotely during the pandemic taught staff that some of their work is siloed and communications among teams sometimes is not clear. When leadership and implementation is shared, it isn’t always clear who’s in charge of what.
- Staff hopes the new minister will take time to get to know them and learn their capabilities and their ideas; consult with all parties whose work will be impacted by changes or new programs; and understand the structures that exist and how they can be used to achieve desired change.
- Staff hopes for strong support for a healthy work-life balance. We like challenges and no one is averse to hard work, but we can’t be expected to do the maximum all the time. The policy of “Family First” has been invaluable - staff can attend to their personal and family needs and know that this priority is respected.

Facilities

- This team sees its stewardship of the building as a ministry. They come to it with a level of professionalism and purpose, and take pride in their work. They sometimes feel unseen and unacknowledged, which can feel like classism.
- Interpersonal skills are very important in their daily jobs. Their work requires situational awareness and emotional intelligence. They are the face of the church in some circumstances - welcoming people, dealing with people off the street, handling

emergencies with congregants or visitors, and providing hospitality. It will be helpful to clarify their level of responsibility in these situations.

- They are stretched very thin, especially with community events and outside rentals. There are fewer filled positions now than before the pandemic. Sometimes events are scheduled and decisions made without consideration of the impact on facilities staff, and without much, if any, notice. This includes worship planning - sometimes there is insufficient notice on equipment needed or preparation required.
- Facilities staff would like the chance to periodically check in and debrief - what's working, what needs attention?

Administration/finance

- This is a well-oiled machine, with long tenured staff and good communications among them. Cross training helps them cover for or support one another in emergencies or absences.
- When the current Executive Director retires, the role may change. Some duties are being outsourced, others may be redefined or reassigned.
- It is an expectation that staff will offer hospitality, simply as a part of being on the church staff. They want to, and do, exhibit generosity and graciousness in the midst of craziness.

Program

- Staff would like to develop a culture of learning - steer away from perfectionism, or even excellence. The things they want to integrate into their work - values work, anti-racism, and so on - need to be part of their day to day work and not something added to already full plates. Every program staff member should have funded professional development as part of their work.
- The church will continue to contend with the pandemic and its effects for a long time. The pandemic is making our transition more complex. In some ways it has left staff and the congregation hurting, and in some ways has opened us up to change.
- There are questions about whether our criteria for membership is legitimate or a good way to do things.
- They appreciate a minister who has a sense of strategy, can set big picture parameters and allow independent work toward that end. They'd like to have a sense of how their programs fit into the whole, how they are integrated to contribute to the mission, and how they are part of the larger ministry.
- The Minister's involvement in the spiritual formation of people includes a consistent theological message (in plain-speak, not UUA vernacular) that programs and staff can be able to carry and reinforce in their work.

Religious Education

- RE can be a brave space for kids to take risks and discuss dangerous questions in the context of caring relationships. This has huge value for their personal and spiritual development.

- There's a lack of integration. RE classrooms are not used for other purposes. Children and youth are seen as performers in the larger congregation. Rites of passage can be more like "photo ops" than serious listening and learning from kids. Many congregants have no connection at all with RE. Kids need to know other caring adults. How can we engage more people, not just parents?
- RE staff hopes for the new minister to understand the complexity of faith formation with kids as well as adults, to know the children and youth, to engage them meaningfully in worship and other aspects of church life.
- RE for children and youth is where we see multiculturalism and dismantling dominant culture being present.

Executive Team

- UU theology undergirds the ET. The ET is the embodiment of covenant and right relationship. It is not merely an institutional arrangement, but an extension of lived theology.
- The ET is the "center of the wheel." It provides the structure to talk about mission, vision, and purpose, to link theology and prophetic imagination to program and operations. It anchors leadership in complementarity - of task, expertise, thinking style, and role. It creates opportunities for creative visioning and integration.
- Operating by consensus is a way to be sure we are making decisions in the best interest of the church, and sharing responsibility for implementation.
- The relationship with the Board is stronger with an ET, because no one person can provide the rounded and comprehensive answers to the questions in the Board's purview and the updates required by policy governance.
- Because anti-racism and intercultural work permeate our Ends, our programs, and our spiritual development at Unity, it is important that a new minister brings critical consciousness and experience in anti-racism and intercultural work.
- The executive administrative role should remain on the ET, but after our Executive Director's retirement could be filled by an associate minister with executive and operational skills.
- Compensation may be a future challenge. The ET's work is held in covenant, but that hasn't been translated into comparable salaries. Though the people in non-senior minister positions have not expected to be paid comparably, it raises the question about why they are not, if their level of authority and decision making is the same.
- Members of the ET provide professional and personal support to one another. A well-functioning ET relies on trust, honesty, and a willingness to openly address conflict and differences. When membership of the ET has changed, Unity has sought the counsel of UUA mentors to clarify roles and establish norms. The ET's annual retreat to set work priorities for the year has also been a time to identify areas for growth, and to deepen relationships.