

Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge (UCBR) Cottage Meetings Summary

August 2020

Methodology:

To gain feedback to help guide its work, the Senior Minister Search Committee of the Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge (Search Committee) conducted 14 cottage meetings during the time frame of May-June of 2020. Due to the restrictions in place because of the Covid-19 pandemic, all of the meetings were conducted via Zoom. Two members of the SEARCH committee were present at each meeting, with one serving as the facilitator and one as the note taker. Seventy-five (75) congregants participated in the meetings. Each was asked the following four questions:

- How are your needs met by the church community?
- What do you dream and/or fear about the future of the church?
- What do you hope will never change about the UCBR community?
- When thinking about the church and its community, what do you hope may change or be addressed more creatively in the future?

Participants were also given the opportunity to add any remaining comments at the end of the meeting. Below is a summary of the answers to each question, followed by a breakdown of frequency of the responses.

1. How are your needs met by the church community?

Participants in the cottage meetings said their needs are met by the church community in three primary ways: by being part of a caring, welcoming, and like-minded community; by attending inspirational and challenging worship services; and by the church's commitment to social justice and equity. Virtually all of the participants described the UCBR community as one that extends authentic welcome, as a place where people with shared values can exchange ideas and form deep and lasting friendships, as a community that takes great care of one another in times of need, and that offers opportunities for learning, fun, and fellowship. There was frequent mention of the importance of small groups and how they foster fellowship and growth. Particular emphasis was given to Branches groups, coffee hour after church, and other activities such as book clubs and family fellowship events. One described the community as being "a warm bath of caring and support."

In addition to meetings its members need through the strength of its community, the cottage meeting participants also described how UCBR offers them a place for growth, inspiration, and transformation. Many spoke of their love for the Sunday service, with its diverse readings, its rituals such as placement of stones, and its offering of inspirational

sermons delivered by engaged and accessible ministers. Several noted how the service strikes a balance between intellectual and spiritual needs and how the services challenge congregants to be their better selves. The quality and the importance of the church’s music program was emphasized in numerous responses.

Finally, the needs of members are met by the church’s deep-rooted commitment to social justice. Participants described how the church’s involvement and dedication to equality and liberal progressive causes provide them opportunities for individual growth and transformation and to engage in direct activism. Several described how the church has helped them more effectively confront their own biases and prejudices - one how the church helps teach him what it means to be human. Much pride was expressed in the church’s involvement and leadership in the larger community social justice issues, in our involvement in groups such as Together Baton Rouge and the Interfaith Council, and as being known as the church that always show up.

Personal connections within our church community	28%
Worship services	18%
Opportunity for spiritual and intellectual growth	14%
Social justice and community involvement	12%
Through the music	6%
Branches	6%
By welcoming new people into the church community	5%
Small group programs- book clubs, tai chi, etc.	4%
As a support network	4%
Through our shared values	3%

2. What do you dream and/or fear about the future of the church?

Participants in the cottage meetings expressed bold and expansive dreams about the future of UCBR. They envision a church that plays an even greater role in social justice actions, with UCBR providing the bold and outspoken leadership needed for there to be a more just and equitable church and community. They dream of church with a more diverse membership, energized by growing numbers of young people and people of color. They want a more robust system in place to welcome and grow new members. Many spoke of the church needing to develop more effective outreach strategies, including the use of social media and technology, so that others in the community will know who we are and what we offer. Outreach to local colleges was named as an important aspect of these efforts. Participants also hope for a future where the church achieves the financial stability it needs to achieve its mission and goals.

The participants were not without fears about the future of the church. They fear that the congregation is aging and that a lack of a comprehensive outreach strategy to engage younger members will lead to decreasing membership. They expressed concern about a lack of financial stability that the church needs to move securely into the future. There was fear voiced that the lengthy search process and the church’s subsequent need for multiple interim ministers may lead to diminished pledges and decreased membership. Prominent in the responses was concern over how the UCBR church community will be impacted by the pandemic and the resulting required separation from the bedrock community so eloquently described in the answered to the first question. Questions such as “who will we be if we cannot be together” were raised.

Building and diversifying our church community	24%
Increased community involvement and social justice impact	18%
Increased marketing, including college campuses	18%
More younger members	13%
Always having a dynamic, inspiring minister	13%
Development for leadership and new members	4%
Greater use of technology	4%
Expanding RE/OWL	3%
Enhancing the church campus	3%

3. What do you hope will never change about the UCBR community?

Not surprisingly, the major aspects of UCBR that participants want to see unchanged are the strong, welcoming, and caring community, the structure of the Sunday service, and the church’s commitment to social justice and equity. Participants spoke of the need for the church to remain a welcoming place of acceptance and tolerance for different beliefs (yet shared values), and to remain a community that cares easily and readily for its own during time of trouble. Particular reference was made to the continuation of Branches, of personal development groups such as book clubs, of activism initiatives such Days for Girls, and of fellowship activities like the gumbo cook off.

Cottage meeting participants do not want the basic structure or diverse nature of the Sunday service to change. They spoke of the importance of rituals such as placing of the stones and of the diversity of readings, both from a philosophical and theological perspective and in terms of format (poetry, essay, etc.). They also spoke of a hope that the quality of sermons and accessibility of the ministers will continue. Very clear in the responses is the participants desire that the church’s dedication to the music program remain strong.

And finally, the participants do not want the church to diminish its dedication to social justice, both within the church community as it seeks a more diverse and equitable membership or within the larger Baton Rouge community. They want a continued relationship with Together Baton Rouge and the Interfaith Council and want continuation of internal programs such as Beloved Conversations. As they did earlier, they spoke with great pride of being members of a church that shows up and stated strongly here that they want us to remain so.

Sense of community, inclusion, and being welcome	37%
Commitment to social justice and 'showing up'	19%
Inspiring services and rituals, including multiple faith traditions	17%
Music	8%
Congregational care	4%
Engagement with ministers	3%
Branches	3%
RE	3%
Nathan	2%
Fun fellowship activities	2%

4. When thinking about the church and its community, what do you hope may change or be addressed more creatively in the future?

As strong as the UCBR is, cottage meeting participants noted numerous things the church needs to change or to do better in order to fully realize its potential. Primary among them is the need for the church to develop a more comprehensive outreach program, including on college campuses, to attract a larger numbers of people, including the young, to the church. This outreach should include an increase use of social media and technology.

Other changes discussed were:

- A need for a much more organized and effective way to engage, develop and retain new members;
- A need for better leadership development strategies and more effective, transparent communication processes;
- A better integration of children and youth within the larger church community especially, during their transitioning from senior youth to adult members; and
- A need for a new stewardship and fund-raising strategies to achieve financial stability.

Finally, participants spoke of a desire to see a more diverse congregation and staff and of the church becoming an even stronger, bolder, and radical voice for social justice and equity in Baton Rouge.

Enhance marketing, including universities	14%
Appeal more to younger people	13%
Improve internal communication	10%
Increase use of technology	9%
Improve engagement and development of new members	9%
Develop leadership and volunteers	8%
Improve fiscal management and stewardship	7%
Add more events	6%
Provide adult RE	6%
Diversify the membership	5%
Include RE and youth in worship	4%
Include additional religious traditions	3%
Improve the organizational structure	2%
Increase involvement with UUA and regional UU	2%
Diversify the staff	2%