

Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge

Focus Groups 2020

The Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge's Senior Minister Search Committee (Search Committee), gathered information from congregants by conducting a Congregational Survey and by holding cottage meetings. Summaries of both can be found on the search website (<https://search.unitarianbr.org/>). To gain more targeted feedback from the congregation, the Search Committee also conducted 14 focus groups throughout the month of June 2020. Approximately 82 congregants participated in focus groups, although that is not an unduplicated count since some members participated in more than one focus groups.

As with the cottage meetings, two members of the Search Committee attended each focus group, with one serving as facilitator and one as note-taker. Unlike the cottage meetings, focus groups were not asked the same questions. Rather, the questions were developed to gain the unique perspectives of the targeted groups.

Below is the feedback gathered from the Focus Groups. Groups are arranged in alphabetical order.

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1. Board

1. *From your perspective as a board member, how would you describe your role to a prospective Senior Minister?*

Board members described their roles as being representatives of church charged with making decisions on its behalf. As its governing body, the Board has a clear sense of its duty to uphold the church's mission, to protect its financial health and obligations, to create policies, update the by-laws, and to develop annual vision of ministry. Many spoke of a sense of duty and loyalty to the congregation and to each other. Several spoke of importance of setting examples for church in terms of making financial commitment to church, staying in covenant with each other, and having transparent communication.

2. *How would you describe an optimal relationship between the board and the senior minister?*

Relationship should be collaborative, with good and respectful, open, and honest communication especially when dealing with difficult issues. Senior Minister and Board should have same focus and work in same direction to achieve the church's mission and vision. Relationship is covenantal. Board evaluates ministry team lead (Senior Minister) and holds them accountable. This requires clear goals and a vision of ministry.

3. *What aspects of the church's leadership do you hope will not change?*

Board members hope the following with not change:

- a. Focus on social justice both internally and externally, including involvement with Together Baton Rouge and racial justice work. We should remain the church that shows up and stays committed to the common good.
 - b. The church has a good balance of power with not one dominant focus of power. Church does not have cliques or overbearing oligarchy.
 - c. Open communication between leadership and larger church.
 - d. Worship Guild and music program.
 - e. Close covenantal relationship between Senior Minister and Associate Minister.
4. *What do you hope can change or be addressed more creatively or effectively?*
 - a. Take better advantage of opportunities to grow race work, including ways to develop white members as allies. Black members see missed opportunities and ways for church to be more creative in its race work.

- b. More and better engagement of families and youth. This needs to be more fully explored and made a higher priority.
 - c. A stronger and more comprehensive plan to grow membership and to market church to the larger community. We need to be in communication with other UU churches. We need a certified membership professional.
 - d. Stronger financial and business development leadership from Senior Minister. We need more stable finances and year-round stewardship. We need to explore other revenue raising avenues.
 - e. Stronger leadership development and succession planning.
5. *What does the Senior Minister need to know about our church that they will not find in documents, archive history, or other usual places?*

Senior Minister needs to know the church has a strong sense of community and intimacy, offering a place for all members to connect. We have managed conflicts without allowing them to tear the community apart. They should know how polite we are and that we are not always good at surfacing conflict and managing it. Many members come from Catholic and fundamentalist traditions, and baggage from this can color how we define ourselves spiritually. There is an energy and synergy that is positive for the most part but can result in group think. But the energy of church is beautiful, and the Senior Minister needs to look at us with heart and inner being. If the Senior Minister comes from another part of the country, they need to learn the rhythms and culture of the unique environment of South Louisiana.

One member added that the church has been successful at conflict resolution by addressing it through small groups where people had a voice a process that maintained respect and dignity.

2. Choir

1. *What do you believe to be the most important role of the music program in our church community?*

Major roles of music program are to offer congregation a spiritual, moving, and inspirational experiences that goes beyond sermons and readings. Music brings transcendence to the worship service that can move congregations from the rational side to greater feeling and emotion. Music provides a way for spirit to move within congregants. Music offers members a way to participate either directly or indirectly. People come to church to feel, and music can do this more than words ever can, by reaching the heart.

2. *What do you think is the area of growth or change most needed to fulfill the aspirational goals of the music program in our church community?*

Choir members envision a greatly expanded music program, unrestrained by resources. This could mean a larger adult choir, a children's choir, a family choir, a teen choir, small ensembles, and drumming circles. An expanded music program could mean great music every Sunday, and not just on some Sundays. They also would like to see growth in the diversity of the music performed, with that diversity more integrated into services rather than having one Gospel service, one blues services, etc. Several talked about having a large enough choir to have section leaders and a program so developed that it could offer lessons on how to read music.

3. *What is the Senior Minister's role in supporting the music program?*

Senior Minister needs to understand the central role music plans in worship and needs to be able to communicate with the music staff on how to integrate music into the worship experience. The Senior Minister should buy into music as a vital part of the life of the church, including finding and managing resources necessary to support and grow a robust music program. The Senior Minister should be open to new music experiences that may not be found in the hymnal. They need to trust the music leadership.

Several commented on the work the music staff is doing to provide music during the pandemic.

3. LGBTQ

1. *As a LGBTQ member, do you feel your needs are met by the church community? If not, how could the church better meet your needs?*

Participants mostly agreed that the church meets their needs because the church is affirming and welcoming, especially with Pride services and inclusion in sermons. However, church does need to be more diligent by including pronouns on name tags and using more complete identifications on bathrooms. Could also do more around gender expansion. There are pride flags for every identify, so why not include these flags on name tags? Gay people should not have to carry the burden of Pride.

2. *Do you feel the church community offers you a welcoming place of acceptance and growth? If not, how could the church be a more welcoming place?*

Again, participants see the church community as a welcoming place of acceptance and growth, especially from a "top down" perspective. A feeling of including in sermons and announcements. However, there is not much "in the middle" since there is not much community outreach or education from the church as an organization. More

intentional outreach efforts to young people to let them know we are here and to dispel belief that all churches are anti-gay. The OWL program helps, but church could also offer other forms of education on culture, rights, and history. We need to better leverage our prominence in the Pride community and become more vocal and more visible to youth and to LGBTQ groups.

3. *What do you think are the areas of growth or change most needed for our church to be a community that welcomes LGBTQ people?*

Areas of growth discussed were having a more expansive youth program, more social events, and ongoing activities that expose people to something different. All of these would make the church more approachable. Church could also provide leadership from outside the LGBTQ community and develop a network of allies. Church should offer OWL for adults and should offer more opportunities to learn and discuss queer theology.

4. *What is the role of the Senior Minister in creating a welcoming and diverse church community?*

A baseline has been established, but the church is not moving forward. The Senior Minister needs to lead this and be OK with leaning in on congregants and community to do things that are not comfortable. We have taken stands that resulted in criticism from the community (like performing gay marriages). The new Senior Minister needs to take such stands as well. What do we do next? Senior Minister should ensure that all voices of the congregation are represented in sermons. They should also show up for community-wide events.

Additional comments:

The church could do more for people who are still learning and searching and should not take for granted that church is up to speed on sexual diversity and gender identify. Congregation may be OK with same-sex, but need more expansive education on other identifies such as bisexual, trans, etc. There needs to be more conversation and help for people searching.

4. Long-Term Members

1. *As a long-term member, what would you list as the 2 or 3 most characteristics of a successful Senior Minister?*

For the long-term members who participated in the focus group, it is most important that the Senior Minister be able to craft inspirational, thought provoking sermons and worship services, be a strong advocate for social justice both in the church and in the

wider community, be able to continue and strengthen our community involvement and outreach, and be a strong administrator and steward of the church's resources. Also named were a courageous spirit, a welcoming, friendly, patient, and empathetic demeanor, a sense of humor, church leadership experience, and a visionary eye.

2. *In looking over your years as members, what have been some of our challenges and our successes?*

Over the years, the church has had some challenges. Those named during the focus group were Katrina, the disagreement over use of church by childcare group, the departure of RE director, the transition to a larger church, and the shooting of Yoshi Hattori. The church manages challenges such as these through small group talk sessions and communication. Long-term members consider the handling of these difficult situations as successes of the church community.

3. *What changes do you think are needed to bring us forward? What needs to remain the same?*

To move us forward, long-term members believe the church needs to achieve greater financial stability, to be more successful in growing and retaining membership, especially in outreach to young people and families, to demonstrate a stronger commitment to mentoring and nurturing our youth, and to have a stronger and more prominent voice for social justice and equity. Also named were a more effective development of lay leadership, better internal communication, more use of social media, more diverse and interactive worship services, expansion of the music program, and better use of the building (renting it out, open for more groups, etc).

The participants believe the following things in the church should not change: strong commitment to social justice and equity; prominent community presence and involvement in Together Baton Rouge; commitment to family ministry, RE, and the OWL program; the music program; worship rituals such as placing of stones; and congregational care.

4. *What would you say to our new Senior Minister are the most important thing(s) for them to know about our community?*

The participants would want the new Senior Minister to know that the community in this church is strong and caring and is made up of committed, involved, caring, intelligent, curious, and sometimes opinionated members. The new minister needs to listen to members and engage them directly. It is also important for them to know the rich history of the church and the role it has played in local social justice and equity issues and the importance of continuing this involvement. The new Senior Minister

needs to understand the influence of Southern culture on the church and learn to “read between the lines” and that politeness does not indicate lack of dedication or passion.

5. Pastoral Care

1. *As a member of a pastoral care team, what do you believe to be your most important role in our church community?*

The participants described their role as connecting and caring for the congregation in some particularly important and tangible ways. The Congregational Care Team (CCT) puts cards out on Sunday morning for the congregation to sign. The cards are sent to members who are ill, who have suffered a loss, who need a special congratulation for an achievement, or who are celebrating a birthday or anniversary. The CCT helps take care of the logistical needs of the congregation by helping with transportation, food, and memorial service receptions. The group also stays in touch with members who cannot attend church or who are in nursing homes. The group meets bi-weekly to coordinate efforts. Cards are still being mailed during the pandemic.

The Pastoral Care Team (PCT) is a “clear and active presence” in the listening room, when they sit with and visit church members and their families in the hospital, and when they attend funerals. This takes communication and consultation with ministerial staff.

2. *How would you describe the strengths of our pastoral care?*

The CCT participants in the focus group sees the Team’s ability to keep in regular contact with congregants, even during the pandemic, as one of its strengths.

The PPC members in the group believe the Team’s long history is a strength because congregants are aware of the Team and knows how to access it. The PCT members are trained to listen to people around spirituality issues, crises of faith, grief support, and other areas.

3. *Are there areas of growth or change needed to our pastoral care outreach?*

Summarizing the responses would have lost the fullness and complexity of the answers given to this question. Therefore, below are actual responses given. Some have been edited to remove personal identifying information and to allow for smoother grammatical transition.

“There has been information published from the UUA that offers some formal training and would be helpful to grow. This would be a way to replenish pastoral care associates.”

“We need a revision in our branding and in thinking about pastoral care because sometimes it’s not clear which is what. The Care Team might include all three - PCT, CCT, and Branches. Communication among team members in another growth area.”

“Steve offered Building Your Own Theology II. It included doing your own memorial service, etc. It was incredibly useful. I see this stressful time as a time to connect on theological issues. Chats are good, but informative sessions would be good too. Church needs to work long term on leadership id issues, offering courses in theology, taking care of ourselves and others. Thinking about our own theology. Offering classes would be easy now. Then we could see who might want to get more involved. People come to church because they hurt, the ubiquitous pain of loneliness. We need to do something short term about that. Renee Brown’s book. If we get somebody interested in care and theology, we could do more together and that would augment the social justice work we do.”

“I have a dream, a vision for us. The UUA offers certification for membership professionals and I see all of us being under the umbrella of the membership professional. Welcome table, Roots, Branches, PCA, CCT. This would help us with recruiting. I think we miss opportunities when new members go thru Roots but don’t get into a ministry. We’ve said we want them to focus on Branches. It would help with communications issues we see today. We were looking at what we could do to enhance our ServantKeeper database program; there are many things it could help us with. I’d like to see us to do more with that. CCT is mostly a group of little old ladies. Sometimes we need young strong people. I’d like to see more outreach to non-traditional folks.”

“Membership is a piece this church needs to concentrate on. Membership person needs to be a volunteer and member of the church.”

“I thought it was important to get Roots graduates familiar with the church, but we need to connect them, as well.”

“A recruiting Branches session... People might like to try it. All Branches groups could talk about what roles and ministries are available in the church.”

4. *What is the Senior Minister’s role in supporting pastoral care?*

The participants in the focus groups shared the following regarding the role of the Senior Minister:

- Make membership coordination a priority.

- Provide clarity on the both the vision of the role of the PCT and the expectations as to its role. The Senior Minister needs to stay aware and updated on PCT contacts and status.
- Interim Minister offered training around spirituality for PCT members and opened the door to what pastoral care looks like as a church gets bigger. Having a minister with crisis intervention experience was helpful and much needed.
- Should be willing to teach some classes. Co-teaching would develop leadership on Team
- Needs to recognize the need to take care of members in the community and be a leader in that role.

6. People of Color

1. *Do you feel your needs are met by the church community? If not, how could the church better meet your needs?*

-Yes. Feelings of acceptance, belonging, and being in a sense of community in the church with others.

-I feel very welcomed and cared about from the church. That has to do with this being a place to be myself.

-It depends. It is a place where I can be myself and work in the community. However, some needs are not met, and I cannot categorize them spiritually. When there is a racist event that happens, sometimes the church does not meet that need. It seems the top ministerial staff cannot identify with my needs. They cannot adequately connect. It is not necessary negative, it's just a different type of spiritual need that cannot be met.

-Bouncing off of the previous speaker, I do feel like a lot of emphasis is placed on what the white congregations can do, but so much attention is placed on the needs of white people as they work through racism, nothing is made available for the Black people in the church.

-As a teen, it seems that the church related to white teens and their needs as white teens, not to Black youth.

-I feel the same kind of dissonance. It seems that we center white kids. We seem to soften our reference to racism and white supremacy. When I was an early teen, I did not know where I was. And when I started thinking about race, I did not fit into RE, so I sat in the sanctuary. I am not the only Black youth in UUA that has this problem. What are we doing on the smaller scale to get kids interested in coming? They are looking for a community that is based on our whole selves not just one aspect. And that can be hard to connect.

-I have a general sense that my needs are getting met when I attend. I suppose I do not look to the church to be everything for me. I remember Beloved Conversations. I think that a lot of people are willing to try and willing to learn. I think that we need to endeavor to have other voices come in to enlighten people. We need to bring in others. Unfortunately, it seems that every other day something else happens. The fact that we are doing this now says a lot about the people at the church.

-I want to reiterate that I feel like as a Black person when we deal with race issues that Black people do not have agency. In Beloved Conversations, Black people were characters, were used, but no agency. It seems like sometimes the agency of people of color to speak about race is just not there. I think people are trying, but at some point, if you can Google, you can find a way to learn white allyship. But why should I as a Black person teach white people how to race work with Black people? There are other ways to bring in voices that give people agency in doing spiritual race work

-I have noticed that I need for us to work on the performativity aspects to the allyship work. A lot of the times it seems like "yes, I did Beloved Conversations, when are we not going to be subjects?" I feel like I'm being analyzed, and I felt a lot of that growing up. When will I stop feeling like a visitor in my own church?

2. *Do you feel the church community offers a person of color a welcoming place of acceptance and growth? If not, how could the church be a more welcoming place?*

-I would say yes, but with underlying conditions. I often feel censored by individuals. Thankfully, our church has always engaged in Social Justice work and anti-oppression work. We need more education classes. I think it should be a Black focus group and a POC focus group and Whites should have their own focus group. And them get together to work on things.

-Yes. I feel welcomed, but sometimes when I have spoken my mind, I have felt very censored and excuses have been made for white members that are just clueless. This is how this person was raised, as though I have my own ways and was raised. There is a lot of white fragility in this church and the white fragility is very sweet and very polite. But even if you put lipstick on a pig you still slaughter it for bacon. Leave Black people alone when they walk into the church. Let them alone. Let them be just be a person in church before they are Black. When I came to the church I was in a low spiritual place, but after a while, I was introduced to other Black people in the church by white people.

-I think that there is a lot of white fragility in our church and it enabled a lot. Trying to soften everything. No one is being mean, but some of the behaviors that I've seen, I'm like you, should have known better. I'm young, and just observing things, but I think it is enabled because we try to be so soft about everything. If I can see it at 10, people should see it at 50.

-I have been a member so long; it is difficult to think back. I feel very welcomed and always have. We are the people making people feel welcomed. Through the years, when I greeted POC I did in a way to make people feel welcomed so that we can add

diversity to the church. I felt that over the years I have always been welcomed. I want to be open to other views. I was always interested in having more.

-Let's not overdo it until it becomes a spectacle. I honor and appreciate our longer Black members' longevity and how they have developed the church in this manner. That is not lost on me.

-There are some people who get excited when Black people arrive. White people do too. We want to see the diversity. I love it.

-I could tell you from my experience from our church that being the new person of color in the New Orleans church was weird. I did not go back. It turned me off to that space. There are more people of color at our church than at the New Orleans church. I was the only one. POC are often made to feel "othered" even when a white person is trying to be welcoming.

-I felt the church to be welcoming from the first day. There was once a statement by someone about a church where we do not have to leave our brains at the door. I do not know that we would be any less welcomed at our church than going to other churches in town.

3. *From your perspective, what are the areas of growth or change that you would like to see in our church?*

-I want to do a reflection. About four years ago, we approached church administration, but they kind of took a no hands approach. I did not feel any follow through. It was hands off. We needed structure, and the usual push for structure was not present. I don't know why. There was a desire to develop a space, but it was left totally up to us, and leadership was hands off.

-I would like to just see more people of color. Some of our issues can only be resolved with more people of color. We cannot expect to have a church the way we want it, and the church is not reflective of the world we live in.

-I met a fellow Black church member at one of the outreach tables at Southern University. We can still do outreach in different ways, like our work with the Food Bank.

-We need intentional outreach and let people know that we exist. That will speak for itself. Come up with information for the public.

-A class would come to church to church and ask questions and get them answered. Going out and inviting people in.

-I love when we are doing the stones and the kids are walking by. I would like to see more families in the church of any color. I want to share a larger vision for the church. I would love to see our church make history I would like to see a social justice center, community health center, a school. There was once talk of a Unitarian school, but I would like to see us reach out to the disenfranchised in a big way. Imagine if the church did the work that we see each other doing in a concentrated way with the power of the

UUA behind us, the community outreach. I want to see families grow. I want to see the church grow into the community as a member of the faith community.

-We can have more programs that would bring others in. We would need to be intentional in designing different kinds of classes and events to invite in the community. Perhaps partnerships where we would have more interactions with the interfaith federation. We used to have many classes, and this could be one way of bringing more people into the church and becoming better known.

-Partner with others to bring in speakers. I enjoy the families too. More joyful expressions. More clapping and singing. When the children leave, they need happy music to send them out of the sanctuary. Happy skipping music. I love the families.

-More engagement with the families and youth. They are only there briefly. We need to develop the youth by using them more. A more intentional effort to give the young people more agency. A near peer program engagement with the youth.

-I think that this generation is hard to motivate. We should consult with recently graduated. I felt disconnected as a Black youth, you really feel that in class when everything is centered around white kids. We can be more engaged. They don't have to be scared that we are Black. Why can't the RE talk about issues about the Black community, instead of these abstract ideas.

-My son doesn't want to become involved because he doesn't feel connected as a Black male. Let's use our engaging kids and try to pull that diversity together and tap into it the right way.

-Maybe have a special group for Black congregants. I think that it would be great time to have it when people come right out of Roots class. Roots has a great platform for new members to learn the church, but there is no place to learn what one can bring to the church. I remember being a new teacher and they would I tell the teachers not to hang out in the faculty lounge. It should not be a place where the Black people sit around and gripe about what the church isn't. It is an adjustment. It would be there to help people get through things so that when people do experience micro-aggressions, they have a space to process it.

4. *What is the role of the Senior Minister in creating a welcoming and diverse church for all?*

-Leadership. Helping to create an atmosphere of welcome and diversity. Modeling it. We should hope that they have had some experience with diversity.

-Black and fearless.

-At least the Senior Minister would be knowledgeable about ways to achieve diversity. Preach appropriate sermons. They should be doing her own work around racism and oppression. Challenging the views and doing some work themselves. Be they Black or

white. There is an attitude of being dedicated to this outcome to create necessary diversity

-The Senior Minister should possess creativity. To take the church in new and unexpected directions that cause growth. To teach, not just sermonize. Teach how we relate to one another and in spirituality. I want to see a Senior Minister who is committed to race and social justice. To be that of a nurturer in terms of everything that goes on in the church. Pastoral in the tradition of the missionary Baptist church. Pastor. And should lead with empathy, not performative empathy, but true empathy.

-I agree with everything. The Senior Minister should set the tone and should not seek to do all this work by themselves. It is huge. A monumental task. I would hope that whomever we bring in must have a track record of doing this work. I hope that the minister should educate the congregation and get people out of their comfort zone. People go back to their world. They do the opposite of Dr. King's saying. We need more people to engage outside of the church, as well as in it.

-I would like to know how the next minister feels and what they have done to address the issues of their community. They should not want us to be insulated, but instead be out in the community.

-In the music culture, why is it that we have boxed ourselves into time constraints? We can enrich our experience after the service. Maybe a gathering after the service that would speak to diversity? One hour is not enough. To me Sunday is a sacred day.

-You would like to extend the fellowship with a potluck and a diversity speaker. This all takes person power. Let the kids run it and then there is more investment.

5. *Is there anything that you would like to add?*

-We still have much work to do. And I just feel that after the book studies and Beloved Conversations and listening to people respond to different books, I realize that there is a lot of work to do. The current times we are in dealing with racism and oppression and history. It's good, but we have a lot of work to do.

-Now that we are in this pandemic we can move beyond Louisiana and hook up with another church with more Black members.

-I think that we are having these conversations and dialogue. I think that it is a very healthy that we are talking about this more. We are addressing the issues of racism and making it a very open conversation and dialogue.

-I want to reiterate, that in RE, there needs to be more emphasis on concrete things that are going on in the real world. The curriculum is good, but today's issues are very important. Stuff is happening for adults, but not with the kids. I don't feel like the anti-oppression work happens in class; the kids had no idea what was happening with me and other non-white children. Applying these principles to real issues and not just abstract concepts is important. Imagine what a waste of an opportunity it is when we don't expose UU youth to real issues that affect real people in the church.

7. People with Disabilities

1. *What are the characteristics of a successful Senior Minister?*

They should have a business experience, preferably with a nonprofit and be a great Leader and motivator for staff, volunteers, governance structure and congregation. The church does not utilize our volunteers well. We need a leader who will help us get better with this and follow through to make sure we keep up with our achievements.

To be successful, they should also be good at stewardship...someone who can take us from the annual pledge drive and get us to think about stewardship year-round. Makes us think about what we get from the church and what we should give back. The Senior Minister needs to build awareness of what it takes to get people to give, how the church depended on something like the auction and how a few people took on that responsibility. We need people to give and we need a Senior Minister who knows how to paint the picture of where we are going so people are willing to give.

In addition, a successful Senior Minister should be open minded enough to take on the patriarchal approach to ministry that we have had in our church community. Someone that can challenge gender roles - like all women in RE, all male ministers in the pulpit. Mindset for senior minister is "He."

2. *What challenges do people with disabilities face at our church? What needs to happen to meet these challenges?*

One considers the parking lot a failure due to too few handicap spaces and no covered walkway from drop from cars to get to church. Hearing is a challenge with the current system. We were going to have an app on our phone but for whatever reason it did not work out. Voiced the belief that our white privilege does not let us think or ask about what accessibility problems are needed. Even our language is not geared to understanding disabilities. For example, our sign says, "Standing on the side of love" instead of just "on the side of love." This participant hopes the Senior Minister will bring us a better awareness of the challenges of ableism and will incorporate the disabled into our social justice program.

Other challenges are the lack of a designated wheelchair spot in our sanctuary, and not asking if anyone needs support or assistance when we have activities and events. Also, mental health challenges such as PTSD and its triggers are never addressed. Our ministers should be aware of any member who has mental disability and to make sure we know and are addressing potential triggers. The church in general needs to create more awareness about mental health issues and should make more resources available.

3. *What does not need to change?*

The streaming of services should continue when we are back in church because we have sizeable number of members who can't make it to church on Sundays. Streaming of meetings should also be available so all can participate. The church put an emphasis on serving people who are marginalized, but we are not including disabled people in this group. The church needs to broaden our definition of marginalized to include them.

The church community talks about our shortcomings openly and tries to address them. We need to keep talking and thinking about these things year-round.

We could do an assessment of our access for disabilities of all kinds and then take actions to address those needs.

4. *What is the role of the Senior Minister in creating a welcoming & safe community for people with disabilities?*

The Senior Minister should serve a leadership role in how we address needs of people with disabilities. They should make sure the physical plant is taking their needs into consideration and should charge Social Justice team with including those with accessibility problems as part of the Social Justice agenda. Although we meet the temporary needs of people with physical disabilities pretty well, we do not do as well with ongoing needs. The Senior Minister needs to make needs of disabled a point for all church teams. Training should be provided for greeters and ushers about how to recognize disabilities and how to address them properly. This always needs to be a prominent point of awareness and not just during Sunday morning worship.

The Senior Minister needs to become self-educated and up to date with training regarding challenges of those with disabilities and to be aware of all kinds of disabilities people face. They need to be the primary driver to increase awareness of disabilities and to have the foresight not only voice this awareness, but to make sure steps are taken to achieve it, including asking directly what people need to participate in an activity. Equal access should be thought of ahead of time when planning activities, meetings, etc. For example, how do people not able to attend the auction sign up for dinners, etc. The Senior Minister should always be an active leader in keeping this on the minds of the congregation.

Additional comments:

The Senior Minister needs to say we are going to do an assessment of our approach to meeting needs of people with disabilities, and then make sure we do what we need to do to address the shortcomings. Also, we do not pay enough attention to potential new members who are seeking a church that can accommodate their needs.

8. Religious Education Families

1. *What do you consider to be areas of strength of our Religious Education (RE) program?*

Connecting families to the church is important to our church's health and growth. Providing a reliable, high quality RE program is important to attracting new members and keeping existing members. RE's most important roles are

- 1) educating youth in being good humans and strengthening their connections to the church and community, and
- 2) showing families that their needs are important and that their children are welcome.

Kids love going to RE. They enjoy going and always get a lot out of it. The things RE is doing during the pandemic are very moving – the daily reminders of things we can do during pandemic, postcards, and spiritual toolbox. The OWL program is appreciated and needed.

2. *From your perspective, what are the areas of growth or change needed to meet the goals of our RE program?*

One participant voiced frustration at how hard it was to get connected and to receive communication from church. Has been attending for three years, but just got on distribution list. The kids have different last names and she notices they feel bad about it. Church needs an organizational structure where everyone is included.

One also voiced feeling of kids and families being “shunned away.” As a volunteer in RE, they feel disconnected from other aspects of church and feel stuck in the RE role. She sees people doing things in community around poverty, etc, but no outreach to church members, including families in RE, who may have the same needs.

Also, children moving from one class to another could be done better with celebrations of advancement and preparation for a new class and format.

3. *If not addressed in other questions, do you feel that the RE program is integrated into the full life of the church? If not, how could that happen more successfully?*

Participants agree that RE program, families, and children are not integrated with other aspects of the church. However, one noted that it seems to be getting better and that efforts are being made to integrate the two. This participant felt as if current Director of Family Ministry understands and listens.

4. *What is the Senior Minister's role in supporting the RE program?*

The Senior Minister should provide support for RE, help it maintain its cross-functionality, and help everyone feel included. One participant asked his son what he

wanted to see in a new Senior Minister, and he said someone who is kind, who values all people, and who makes church not boring.

The Senior Minister can support the RE program by ensuring it is supported financially, that the Director of Family Ministry has the latitude to make decisions that need to be made, and by showing interest and support during services and at events for RE with their presence and participation.

Additional comments:

Church lists and communications are a perennial problem. Emails are wrong, there is confusion over names, and a general lack of organization. One participant has had trouble getting any church information.

9. Religious Education Teachers

1. *As RE teachers, what do you believe to be the most important role of the RE in our church community?*

The most important role of RE programming in any church is to normalize children into the church's culture and values from a young age. In the UU church, we also have a goal of modeling love and self-worth for the children and instilling a sense of social justice and fairness.

2. *What do you consider to be an area of strength in our RE program?*

Our RE program is led well by the Director of Family Ministry and there is a good collaborative communication strategy that ensures everyone does their fair share of work. Teachers feel well supported by the church staff in their volunteer efforts, both in RE and from the wider church community.

3. *From your perspective, what are the areas of growth or change needed to meet the goals of our RE program?*

We're meeting the RE needs of our church community pretty well.

4. *What is the Senior Minister's role in supporting the RE program?*

Outreach to parents/guardians about what the RE program offers, coordinating with the RE director for curricular-liturgical/lectionary/preaching schedule.

10. Social Justice Team

1. *As a member of the social justice committee, what do you believe to be your most important role in our church community?*

Answers fell into three general responses.

Number one role was communication. Communicating with the congregation what is going on in the community, connecting community concerns to the church, knowing where and when to show up to be a voice change.

Next was the Social Justice team serves as entry into getting involved with the church. Some said it is what drew them to the church. It serves as a welcoming aspect of our church.

Last, participants said the role of the Social Justice team is to give us opportunities to work together as a congregation as well as working together with the larger community. It gives our members hands-on work such as with the Holy Grill, Together Baton Rouge, and The Interfaith Federation. And the Social Justice team should help lead the response of the church to the wider community

2. *The importance of our social justice work has come up numerous times in our meetings. How would you describe the strengths of our social justice work?*

The responses broke down to how we go about doing our social justice work, our ability to get things done. We heard how our mission translates into specific action. We use practical imagination. We are not top down. We have a diversity of issues we get behind, such as Days for Girls, Together Baton Rouge and The Holy Grill. We are flexible to react to changing issues. If something needs addressing, we can take it on.

The next strength was how we are viewed in the larger community. We are known as the church that shows up. We are trusted community partners and we lend our voices to other groups. We contribute to other community organizations with our monthly shared offering. Our reputation in the community is a strength.

The third category of strengths was how the social justice team benefits the church. Through programs like Beloved Conversations and Dialogue on Race the church learns how we want to be in the world. It is one reason people come to church. We are a good church, multi-faceted, full of passion, supportive, loud, and proud!

3. *What growth or change are needed to strengthen our social justice work?*

Four general areas emerged for ways we can strengthen our social justice work.

1. Inspire youth and young adults to join the social justice team through more inter-generational activities and programs. Reach out to the universities and community college.

2. Develop a greater media presence and better communication with the congregation. The church needs to know what the social justice team is doing inside and outside the church, including through social media and the newsletter. Church members need to know how to get involved. Maybe publicize more from the pulpit.
3. Connect our social justice work with our theology. Get involved with Better Angels to help polarization and other programs to help make SJ work more spiritually meaningful.
4. We should celebrate our success by letting the congregation know of our accomplishments. We should raise up the names of the people doing the work.

4. *What is the Senior Minister's role in supporting our social justice work?*

The responses ran in three main themes: represent the church to the larger community; link our spirituality to our social justice work; and be ready to get involved and go to work.

The respondents want a Senior Minister experienced in SJ issues and ready to get things done. The new Senior Minister needs the courage to speak out on difficult or unpopular issues. They will be the face of our church to the community, and will need to inspire our members to SJ work. They should be able to transform issues like gun control, reproductive rights, voting rights, to a higher spiritual calling. Maybe offer a course on the connection between theology and SJ?

11. Staff

1. *From your perspective, how would you describe the church's leadership and/or administration to a prospective Senior Minister?*

All agreed that working environment is collegial and supportive and that staff works well together. Structure described as traditional hierarchy, with Senior Minister "at the top" with staff in clearly defined roles and responsibilities. All noted good communication between ministers and staff and that ministers seek information from staff before making final decisions. Coming together of the staff in its response to the pandemic a good example of how "solid" it is.

2. *What is (are) the primary roles the Senior Minister plays in supporting and advancing the leadership and/or administration of the church?*

As point person between staff and Board, the Senior Minister should be knowledgeable about work of staff members. Staff members expressed appreciation for having autonomy in doing their jobs and fulfilling their roles. Senior Minister gives opinions

and guidance, but ends with “it’s your program, do what you need to do.”. Also, Senior Minister should continue to encourage staff to fully participate within the church (i.e. congregational meetings) because congregational decisions impact staff. Since moving to policy governance, thoughts and opinions of administrative staff have been taken into serious consideration. A change under Interim Ministers has been reduced involvement of the Senior Minister in details of church operation, moving away from a “hub” model.

3. *What aspects of the church’s leadership and/or administration do you hope will not change?*

Staff hopes the following with not change:

- The sense of mutual support, cooperation, and collegiality.
- Regular staff meetings and regular communications among staff
- Singing in worship and support and continued growth of music ministry.
- Commitment to social justice and working in the community

4. *What do you hope can change or be addressed more creatively or effectively?*

Five major areas were discussed as areas for change and/or growth:

a. Social Justice: Several staff members expressed need for church to do stronger and more aggressive social justice to develop deeper understanding of racial equity and systems of oppression. Work needs to be done both by congregation and church leadership. Church should be prominent social justice leader in community. Together Baton Rouge involvement is good, but we need to do things on our own and in our own name.

b. Faith formation: Need to do more work on lifespan faith formation to close the gap between those that support our church as a whole and those who cannot clearly define what it means to be a UU. We need to do better job of introducing spiritual practices. This is better when done as a whole staff effort rather than just by Director of Family Minister.

c. Services/Worship: Worship staff needs to better incorporate entire church into services with all ages spending time together in services. Worship needs to speak to everyone in the room. In terms of structure, it would be very helpful if there were advanced, thematic planning of services. This would allow for introduction of more cultural traditions. Senior Minister should check in with choir to discuss how hymns/anthems fit into theme of sermon or service.

d. Membership: Congregation is aging and we need to have more comprehensive and creative strategies to bring in new members. People need to know who we are. Need

“boots on the ground” and a presence at LSU, Southern, and Baton Rouge Community College. We need more aggressive retention efforts to move visitors to friend or member. Currently, we lose lots of new members after three months. Also need to continue and expand use of social media and Zoom. We will not grow with current antiquated methods.

e. Communication: Need clear communications polices to replace current piecemeal system. Need more “cross communication” between ministers and staff to expand staff knowledge of broad-church happenings and activities. Weekly staff meetings should continue.

5. *What does the Senior Minister need to know about our church that they will not find in documents, archive history, or other usual places?*

- How loving this community is and how much it has endured. Senior Minister needs to speak to staff individually about the history of the church and its relationships.
- Influence of Southern Culture – speak their minds, but not directly. Senior Minister needs to listen to stories and to what is being said and unsaid. Don’t zero in on what people say, consider what goes unsaid. Do not assume that gentility and kindness mean a person is a simpleton or not informed and engaged. Negative assumptions about the South are untrue. Christianity influences our worship services as seen in our general adherence to Christian calendar. Christian culture is “in in the water here.” Take time to learn cultural “rules”.
- Baton Rouge can be changed, and this church has a great opportunity to be the vehicle for that change.
- Church is intellectual and willing to challenge conventional thought.
- New Senior Minister will need to get out and talk to people – not just in church but in community.

6. *Does the church need additional staff?*

There is a general feeling among staff that church is too reliant on volunteers and that volunteers become overly invested. Volunteers cannot be managed the same way as staff, and this can lead to issues. Church’s over reliance on volunteers has been an Achilles heel. The need for the following additional staff was discussed:

- a. Technology staff to manage website, Wi-Fi, sound system, computer systems, etc. Could help with sound checks and act as producer working before and during services to troubleshoot technology issues. Could develop comprehensive technology plan and protocols.
- b. Social media coordinator
- c. Custodian/Sexton

- d. Building and ground maintenance coordinator
- e. Coordinators in RE for youth program, OWL program, young children program, and RE assistant

12. Volunteers

1. *From your perspective as a volunteer, how would you describe your role in our church community?*

Participants have served the church in several capacities over their years of membership: RE teacher, board secretary, IT support, Congregational Care Team, membership, and buildings and ground. Buildings and grounds role seen as slightly different because it not only serves the church, but also saves the church money.

2. *What do you think is the area of growth or change most needed to develop our volunteer base?*

Several participants voiced need for more recruitment of volunteers and better communications regarding volunteer positions and opportunities. Currently, a small percentage of members volunteer, which causes burn-out in volunteers. We ask the same people over and over to volunteer. People want to be asked to volunteer, and we need to do that with more people. Also, we need to say thank you to our volunteers. It feels as if volunteers as a group put in many hours of work but are not recognized for their efforts. A party for volunteers would be nice.

Getting new members involved more quickly was also suggested. Ways for members to get involved should be discussed during Roots class. We should also have groups present opportunities from the pulpit. An ask from a minister is hard to turn down.

3. *What challenges do you face as a volunteer in our church community?*

Not having enough volunteers leads to burnout. Several participants also named the need for clearer directions to and coordination of volunteers. Communication is sometimes unclear and planning for projects is inadequate. Some projects have died on the vine even after substantial hours were spent. Very frustrating. They recommend tracking volunteer hours so congregation and staff would have a better idea of how many hours volunteers spend. For specialized projects, the church should seek out experts in congregation and give them the support and direction they need to complete it. One participant notes that committee work is a good experience with good leaders and people who are easy to work with.

4. *What is the Senior Minister's role in supporting our volunteers?*

One participant suggests having the Senior Minister participate in recruiting of volunteers. The Senior Minister should know how to fill holes and allow redundancy to balance tasks. Another believes the Senior Minister should manage at a higher level, by having right people in place and providing them with the support they need. Perhaps the church is large enough for to have a dedicated volunteer coordinator.

13. Worship Guild

1. *What are the important characteristics and/or elements of a successful relationship between the Worship Guild and the Senior Minister?*

Open and honest communication between the Senior Minister and Worship Guild is vital. The Senior Minister must be willing to listen to the guild, be able to talk through difficult issues, and must be willing to listen to all voices, including those contrary to their own. The Senior Minister must inspire comfort and safety and respect that the guild does not need to be handled.

2. *What do you consider to be vital components of our worship service?*

Music plays a huge part in worship. The structure of the service is important as are the rituals, such as placing of stones and lighting the chalice. Services should not be tied to any dogma and should draw from different cultures. Services should be diverse and should maintain a sense of warmth.

3. *What do you hope can change or be addressed more creatively in our worship service?*

They would like to see more participation from the congregation. There is too much "sit & get."

4. *What is the biggest ministerial/worship challenge for the next Senior Minister?*

The magnitude of the job requires delegation so that everything does not fall on the Senior Minister. The Senior Minister must have fire and passion and must be powerful, with the capacity to inspire. Without this, the rest falls by the wayside. This congregation is very vocal, about what they like and don't like, so the Senior Minister has to be open to candid feedback and must be able to hear both sides of things.

14. Young adults

1. *As a young adult, how does the community support your needs and growth?*

Several of the young people in the focus group agreed that the community does provide support for their needs and growth. They voiced love for the intergenerational aspect of the church and how they value the connections they have made with older people

and people of different backgrounds. One said “I’ve never felt more welcomed in a faith community, even as a child in my birth religion.”

2. *What attracted you to the church?*

One was initially attracted to the church when he read us described as being the “people who show up” on our website. In his own words “that was exactly what I was looking for. I want people who show up for me and trust that I will show up for them, even if we see the world differently.” Others were attracted by the inclusiveness of our theology, our acceptance of all peoples, and the fact that women are equals in our community. In addition, they liked that sermons are based on non-biblical texts and that sermons are relevant and actionable.

3. *What do you think are the areas of growth or change most needed to have a welcoming program that supports the needs and growth of young adults?*

All participants said church needs to find more ways to connect people and to encourage young adults to come back and to participate more. We could find ways for families to connect in ways that do not require a significant time commitment. We need to find ways to cater to both extroverts and introverts. In addition, the church overall recruiting of new members is weak. This particularly impacts young adults. People high-school age through 40 are very under-represented. The participants acknowledged that this is a difficult age group to attract but wishes we did it better.

A participant wishes music in services could be more diverse. He voiced envy over the way music in southern Black Baptist churches leaves congregation energized and full of joy. Much of our music makes him feel like he is at a church service “on the Titanic.” Finally, finances need to be managed better. We need clarity on what's next. Something such as a capital campaign would provide much-needed clarity on the direction and priorities of our church community. What do people believe in enough to put their monies to work? Maybe a clear vision would inspire contribution and maybe even help with recruitment. Perhaps we lack vision. Perhaps we should look for an inspirational visionary for our new Senior Minister.

4. *What is the role of the Senior Minister in creating a program that supports the needs of young adults?*

The Senior Minister should be vocal about ways to get involved. They should also lead initiatives to grow and maintain our relationships to other churches in the area and keep us connected to the larger national UU community. They need to bring energy and creativity. And most of all, they should serve as a role model.