

# First U Cottage Meeting Summary

In an effort to get congregational input, the Minister Search Committee of First Unitarian Church of Wilmington, Delaware devised a two-step approach to gathering feedback from our members and friends on what they saw as our needs for our next settled minister.

In Step 1, the Committee distributed an online/print survey to solicit congregational feedback, during July/August 2018. The summary results from the 180 participants who took the survey are [available separately](#).

In Step 2, we hosted a series of 12 “Cottage Meetings”—small group listening sessions—during August/September 2018, to delve deeper on some survey topics, and to allow face-to-face discussions with members of the Committee. Each group was asked the same 6 questions, which are outlined below.

During these sessions the 120 participants were asked to think about the future of the congregation and to think holistically about what will best serve the needs of the whole community. The results of these Cottage Meeting sessions are summarized below.

## 1. What is the culture of this church and what did you have to change or learn to be comfortable here?

Interestingly, this question brought responses that showed evidence of **our changing culture**. Many responses described First U as being privileged, majority white, liberal, and intellectually stimulating. Some participants felt that First U was welcoming, caring, and encouraging of new ideas. Others, however, said that the church felt closed, not welcoming, arrogant, and that there was an attitude that we were already enlightened and not willing to grow. First U is active in social justice, but also feels like a Sunday-focused church. There is a feeling of “**how we see ourselves is different from how we really are.**” This may be due to the changing culture of the church. While there are a number of congregants who value the traditions of the church, First U’s more recent members and friends tend to be more diverse in backgrounds and spirituality, and are open to changes in how we worship.

This question brought out the rich spectrum of religious beliefs in our congregation, all co-existing under our covenant. Many theologies are represented, from Humanists to Theists to

Earth-Based beliefs, and many approaches to life's journey are embodied, from more intellectual to more spiritual.

Many mentioned there is an **expectation to participate** (as both positive and negative comments), because there has been a strong culture of volunteering, including on the Board. Our current Developmental Minister, Rev. Roberta Finkelstein encouraged more lay leadership in the day to day operations of the church, with Worship Associates being the most visible addition--and the congregation has responded with enthusiasm. Some even mentioned that going from two ministers to one was a good thing. (We spent a year preparing the congregation for the move from two to one minister, and we are proud of how well they stepped up to fill in the gaps. Note this is the first time in 50+ years that First U has only had one minister, thus a huge change for the congregation.) We have volunteers and they are visible. Some did mention that they have difficulty feeling that they fit in, and knowing how things work.

## **2. What was your best experience in (a) church?**

Several themes were noted. Not surprisingly, **after worship and music, best experiences tended to be those involving participation**—recent or past—that moved people.

In **worship**, emotionally moving and intellectually stimulating sermons were most frequently mentioned as providing a peak church experience, along with music. Big Music Sunday, children's choir or participating in performances were examples of worship music that was moving. Rites of passage for children (e.g. Age of Reason) and life ceremonies (e.g. weddings and funerals) were also offered as meaningful times.

**Participation** in various groups and committees included working together on a team or small group with other like-minded people, such as teaching in the CYRE program, classes such as Building Your Own Theology or Our Whole Lives (OWL), being on the Welcoming Congregation team, participating in social justice issues, and growing through leadership opportunities. A few people shared that receiving personal support or connections was their best experience in church.

## **3. What qualities in a minister will poise us for growth?**

In response to this question, some participants reflected back the question of how can we expect a minister to solve the problem of growth if we have not been able to solve it for 20 years? Others posed the notion that growth is not simply about the number of heads in the sanctuary, but it was also about spiritual growth.

Overall, the qualities presented could fit into four categories: **personality, skill set, community presence, and sermons**. A minister who would poise us for growth would be **charismatic**, inspiring, engaging and warm. The minister should have the skills to connect with members of all ages, understand growth and diversity, **be collaborative with staff and volunteers**, and keep us focused on our values. **The public face of our church should be our minister**, as they build relationships within our community, especially with other clergy, and be visible at community events. Finally, their **sermons should be inspiring and intellectually stimulating**.

#### **4. In what ways do you see the minister being involved in social justice?**

Participants recognized that the minister could not do everything, and that our church already has groups and leaders that are accomplishing a great deal. Instead, the minister would be expected to lead both “internally” and “externally.” Internal leadership would consist of sermons that address international, national and local issues to **inspire us to live our values** (without guiltting those who choose to not participate). Internal leadership would also be responsive to current events, which might necessitate changing a sermon at the last minute in order to address a pressing need. One participant asked to weave social justice “into our DNA.” External leadership would involve participating in community events and **being the face of our church**, networking with other organizations and congregations so we are not working alone, and empowering people to feel engaged.

#### **5. How can we best support a minister of color or from other historically marginalized groups?**

The responses to this question were supportive and recognized the work we still need to do **within our congregation**. We look forward to the upcoming Beyond Categorical Thinking

workshop with Rev. Keith Kron, and will encourage members and friends to attend. We also recognize this effort is just a beginning and will continue for the foreseeable future, whether or not we select a minister of color or from an historically marginalized group.

Some participants at the Cottage Meetings felt that if the Search Committee found a minister who was the right fit for the church and was good at their job, then the minister would be successful at First U. Others recognized that a more proactive approach was needed; suggesting, for example, that we look to other congregations who were both successful and unsuccessful in working with a minister from a marginalized group. Participants also recommended that opportunities to educate the congregation about implicit biases be provided, along with looking to the minister for guidance about how to best support them. Finally, the importance of a right relations covenant was also emphasized.

## **6. What else should we have asked? What did you expect us to ask you?**

The responses to this question were often questions about the search process itself or additional comments to previous questions. Participants also provided suggestions to the Search Committee members. There were two questions posed that members of our congregation may find beneficial to answer on their own, and one suggestion for us to remember:

- Is our congregation ready to make changes to follow the minister for transformation?
- Are we open to a new (inexperienced) minister?
- Do not jump to the opposite extreme of the past negative experiences.