

UUCM 2023/24 Open Questions Findings

In October 2023, the Board of Trustees announced their re-launch of the Open Questions process to gain insight into what the congregants of UUCM are thinking and feeling about UUCM, its place in their lives, and its place in the wider community. They charged a small, short-term committee with leading the effort to run the Open Questions conversations. In December and January 2023-24, the conversations had coalesced in three conversations:

Events and Attendance:

Open Zoom Event 12/5/23 – 9 attendees

Open In-Person Event 12/10/23 – 22 attendees

UUCM Board of Trustees – 7 attendees

Mistakes & Miracles Book Group Event – 1/28/24 – 5 attendees

Several other conversations were floated (among them with the Arts & Aesthetics team, the Humanism Discussion Group, and the Spirituality Sharing Circle) but did not work out either because of lack of fit with the group plans/functioning or failure to find a date that worked. All congregants had an opportunity to participate.

Each group warmed up with the question “What does Beloved Community mean to you?” and then addressed three questions on which copious notes were taken:

- Who do we want to be for one another?
- Who do we want to be for the wider community?
- What are next steps that could help us get there?

Some broad themes emerged across the groups, including:

- A need for belonging and connection, particularly as provided through small group opportunities
- The importance of being truly welcoming (many more details on this below)
- The value of trust, respect, authenticity, and personal growth
- The power of centering love in all we do
- The desire to be visible and known in the community, including as an entity dedicated to the greater good that shows up and acts in support of marginalized communities

- The need to offer both spiritual sanctuary and opportunities to engage in justice work and the importance of communicating that the two are not mutually exclusive but, in fact, support one another (and the importance of communicating that people do not have to engage in everything offered at UUCM)
- A desire to continue to work on multiculturalism – including working toward being comfortable with discomfort and summoning curiosity as our first response
- A need to suss out and acknowledge differing viewpoints and to welcome minority views or the questioning of how we “have always done things”
- A desire to support young people
- A desire to support the LGBTQ+ community
- A need to explore alternative worship-type opportunities to those on Sunday mornings in order to meet needs of people we are not currently serving (and alternative needs of those we are currently serving)
- A need to cultivate engagement at all levels, to grow volunteerism, and to steward our human resources (both staff and volunteer)
- A need to take a hard look at our culture of conflict-avoidance which gets in the way of open and honest conversation and growth (which seems to grow out of a misguided desire to be kind)

More details from the themes that emerged in answer to each question follow.

Themes from Question #1: Who do we want to be for one another?

Supporting/Connecting – be present for one another’s joys and sorrows, be active listeners, provide connection and literal and emotional safety net

Authentic – bring our authentic selves and welcome the same in others (requires high level of trust)

In Right Relations -underlying respect, non-judgment, non-violence, accountability in our interactions

Kind and Honest – and NOT Conflict-Avoidant – address conflicts rather than pretend they don’t exist, but do so through curiosity and kindness; requires growing our skills in self-regulation and co-regulation

Encompassing of Different Viewpoints & Perspectives -welcome diverse opinions, have room for someone to raise the questions no one is asking; embrace theological differences; community of communities concept

Meeting People Where They Are – no requirements to participate / volunteer – only when people are ready

Growth-Oriented - Support each other’s spiritual growth, normalize discomfort as part of growth, mistakes as part of learning, avoid perfectionism, focus on self-responsibility for skill-building

Engaged – cultivate an ethos of volunteerism and recognition for those working to build the common good

Themes from Question #2: Who do we want to be for the wider community?

Love in Action – a place that leads from love, not fear; beloved community includes larger community external to UUCM

A Spiritual Sanctuary – a shelter in the storm, a restorative sanctuary

A Beacon / Visible & Known - Focus needs to be on what we can do for the wider community – and that involves relationship building. Serving with humility.

Showing Up for Justice - We act quickly to respond to injustice situations

A Welcoming Place – receive people the way each one needs / wants to be received, create opportunities for people to check us out, to begin as consumers and still feel comfortable

A Place that Young People Want to Be – we should be a community resource that is used / is useful – especially to young people who may not be drawn to a church

A People of Principles – strong inner commitment to core values that are lived by

Community Leaders (but of the Servant Leader model) – willing to be students of the community and to share our strengths and gifts as needed

Themes from Question #3: What is needed now?

Opportunities to connect – more small social events and small group opportunities

Opportunities to Engage – inventory skills, passions, capacities of members; create bite-sized opportunities that aren't ongoing

Welcoming - We need to find some other in-roads to UUCM – we have to be open enough to change how we do things based on who arrives to join us; cultivate an atmosphere of welcome

Finances / Resources – sustain, strong financial support but also room for those who cannot pledge

Leadership – leadership development, create a pipeline to leadership

Facilities – update building to communicate who we are so people entering know/feel it right away

Outreach - Two different things- who is going to come here and join us and how we are going to be of service in the larger community

Interfaith – more interaction with other congregations

Balance of Spirituality and Justice - need to embrace both things and have them available as resources for the community

Justice Work - Align ourselves with just causes in our community and the wider world

Uplifting Multiculturalism - To move forward on multiculturalism, we need a lot of self work. Need to have entry-level conversations on white supremacy, etc. as well as advanced offerings

Support LGBTQ+ Community - Create a Justice Task Force on LGBTQ+ issues

Generational Issues - Balance of reaching out to youth and accepting that we are an older community; be of service to youth in the wider community

Embracing Our Faith / History - Knowledge of UU history – explore and communicate

Sunday services / Alternative Services – explore services that are different from current (nature-based, contemporary/humanist, non-Sunday, family-focused, justice-focused, for the queer community, etc.)

FULL NOTES FOLLOW (CONSOLIDATED FROM ALL SESSIONS)

Themes from Question #1: Who do we want to be for one another?

Supporting/Connecting

- Post covid reconnection as humans should be the priority.
- Be present for each other
 - Listen
 - Be there for each other in joys and sorrows
- Celebrate the joy
- Meet the pain and the hurting
- Safety net for each other
- Respond to calls for support from other members
- Generous
- Be a love-centered place

Authentic

- Showing up with our authentic selves/whole selves****; being curious, kind, courageous, compassionate, speaking up as needed, sharing others' burdens
- Be authentic and receptive to each other's authenticity
- A high level of trust is required for this**

In Right Relations

- Being in right relations with each other**
- Observing the Principals of UUism
- Non-judgmental**
- Treat each other with respect**

- Support non-violence in action
- Hold ourselves and each other accountable**

Kind and Honest – and NOT Conflict-Avoidant

- Being kind** to each other is so essential to what we're doing here.
- Kindly, transparently, and deeply honest
- We need to be curious, to want to understand, and get comfortable with discomfort.
- A place where people say what they mean and mean what they say, kindly – and then people can address conflict. It can't be safe when there is no conflict – it's inauthentic.
- Kind is finding a way to say your truth
- A place where we can build our skills. Culturally we don't know how to have conflict. Especially skills in self-regulation and co-regulation.
- A place where I can say, "I love you so much that I need to say this to you:"
- Choosing curiosity over certainty – checking in for intention rather than taking offense at the meaning we make up
- Acknowledge conflict with the idea of moving toward understanding

Encompassing of Different Viewpoints & Perspectives

- Have room to challenge, raise the questions no one is asking
- Want to be a place where we can have differences and still be heard and respected. Create community in a safe and healthy way.
- This includes differences in theology – especially belief in god or spirit
- Understanding we don't have to change each other because our work is internal
- Providing room for people's diverse priorities but understanding that we are trying to mesh them – knowing each other and our priorities and making room for them. Community of communities concept. And love is where we all meet, the central priority.
- I want us to be able to accept each others' viewpoints, desires, needs, and where their fears are and are coming from - and acknowledge that. Whether we can satisfy those needs or not, we can acknowledge them.

Meeting People Where They Are

- Welcome all faiths
- No requirements to participate

Growth-Oriented

- Support each other's spiritual growth
- Create opportunities for creativity

- Be comfortable being uncomfortable in this setting**** – taking risks knowing we won't be shamed for trying and not being perfect at it/failing. Normalize discomfort as part of personal growth.
- A place where you can be vulnerable and it can be okay, where you can make mistakes and still be accepted, where you can bring the authentic messiness of who you are. Helped to take risks.
- Seeing who I am when I can't, reminding me who I am.
- Skill-building is great language – non-judgmental and focused on self-responsibility. Also being able to listen with humility is part of that skill-building.

Engaged

- Recognize the work volunteers are doing to support the congregation and figure out how to support them in achieving their goals for service – build the common good.
- Engage with others
- Honor our elders *and* engage our young people

Current Problems Surfaced

- There is a lot of conflict avoidance, which stems from a misguided belief that it is kind
- Passive aggressive behavior gets in the way of the health of the UUCM community
- Too much emphasis on social justice, which dominates throughout. Spiritual growth takes a back seat and we're losing members because of it
- Governance structure is oppressive, overdone, doesn't feel inclusive, needs to be restructured. The Board is taking on too much. Policy changes are "handed down" and community doesn't have input. Sense of community is lost as a result.
- There is a difficulty to radical welcoming when we are a homogenous group in a bubble.

Themes from Question #2: Who do we want to be for the wider community?

Love in Action

- A place that leads from love, not fear
- Known for our generosity
- Our love-centered approach is palpable
- We show something beautiful by example
- Beloved community needs to extend not only to each other but to the community overall

A Spiritual Sanctuary

- Spiritual resource for people with progressive values
- Spiritual and emotional support place not overridden by social/justice action

- A community with warm caring presence without dogma
- UUCM can be a restorative sanctuary
- Shelter in the storm when necessary **and** *the storm when appropriate*

A Beacon / Visible & Known

- We should have more presence in the wider community, get our message out there. We are not well known. We should do projects that invite/include the wider community.
- Not enough visibility in the community – need PR campaign
- A symbol of work toward a greater good. Connected to good causes
- We want to be visible and known for who we are – so then people associate us with our values. By what we sponsor and what we engage in.
- Focus needs to be on what we can do for the wider community – and that involves relationship building. Serving with humility.

Showing Up for Justice

- Known for asking what help is needed, not for telling others what they need
- We act quickly to respond to injustice situations
- We show up and provide support when requested by others
- Change-makers
- Get out the vote campaigns
- People will always have different opinions, want different foci for social justice work, but there should be room for all of it under our broad tent

A Welcoming Place

- Welcome Team now receives people the way each one needs to be received – creating space and room for people to check us out. Whole process of discovery – room for them to come as they are, to begin as consumers and still feel comfortable. A cultural shift to being available guides as opposed to a singular welcoming process.
- Open to all races and sexualities
- New members come and it changes UUCM – a challenge AND an opportunity
- Want to be people who other people can talk to regardless of point of view differences. Incorporate Powerful Non-Defensive Communication so we can become people with whom others want to talk.
- How does the welcoming reflect itself in what people see when they come in?
- There is some self and community exploration on why we want to be welcoming – or if we even want to be welcoming. We are not all things to all people – naming that truth could be valuable. We don't want people with all viewpoints, for instance (oppressive or racist viewpoints).

- [There's a danger in over-emphasizing radical welcoming – don't measure multiculturalism by the "browning of the pews"]

A Place that Young People Want to Be

- Young people don't want to join a church. But they are looking for skills, looking for ways to engage with the things that they care about. And they are needing purpose in response to overwhelm and defeated-ness.
- I really want us to be a resource that is used. Especially for young people. I want us to meet needs – I know a lot of young people for whom nothing in this community feels safe. But we need to be brought up to date, do some lingo-translation, so that what I have experienced is in people's hearts here comes out and our language does not get in the way

A People of Principles

- We have principles that promote, inspire, and are lived by
- Strong inner commitment and growth
- We want to create a community more compassionate, sustainable, and just

Community Leaders (but of the Servant Leader model)

- Willing to be students of the community
- Willing to share our strengths and gifts
- Advocation, leadership, role model
- Well-informed citizens

Themes from Question #3: What is needed now?

Opportunities to connect

- More small social events & small group opportunities**
- More informal, personal opportunities to express contrary views
- Continue fostering an environment that encourages everyone to have a voice
- Offer a grief group

Opportunities to Engage

- It is hard getting people to participate – can we turn it around by making it part of the culture to ask, "How can I help you?" (people have a fear of getting overcommitted if they say yes to something, need bite-sized opportunities that aren't ongoing).
- Inventory skills, passions, capacities of members – what's here and what could we do with it?
- Explore to discover if we have grant writers in UUCM

Welcoming

- Continued interaction among members and new people
- Re-think division between “members” and “visitors” (like in nametags)
- Transforming “Membership” to “Welcome”, from Member to some right, evolving fit (people are less likely to “join” these days- what does that mean for us?)
- We need to find some other in-roads to UUCM – we have to be open enough to change how we do things based on who arrives to join us
- A chance for us to reflect on our own biases and filters, our elitism, bring it to our own awareness so that we can offer radical welcome.
- Educate UUCM on welcoming those who differ in any way from the current norms of who is here
- Train people to greet who aren’t formal greeters. Cultivate an atmosphere of welcome. Train non-greeters on how to informally greet newcomers.
- “Gentle-fy” our Sunday morning welcome – warmth, connecting with others, finding someone to sit with

Communication

- Let people know that they aren’t expected to participate in everything
- More input from general UUCM community on a regular basis (surveys) to understand better their expectations and needs.
- Provide something to help people where to turn for urgently needed help

Finances / Resources

- Plan on using less \$\$ to get by on
- Spend \$\$ to buy “aprons” for all our members
- Sustained strong financial support
- Generosity & support
- Generosity workshop
- Be willing to financially support and welcome people (young people) who can’t afford to pledge

Leadership

- We need to develop human resources (volunteer and/or paid) to carry out any ideas
- We need directed leadership NOW!
- Plan and implement way to grow number of active volunteers members
- Leadership development
- Lower expectations for participation
- Prioritize projects – we can’t do everything
- Build a routine structure for identifying people who can help out in various positions as needed – sort of like a temp placement agency in house!

Facilities

- Upgrade our facilities
- Update building in cost-effective ways to communicate who we are so that when people enter feel at home here
- Hang Barbara Hoyt’s painting of MLK in a permanent way (with label explaining it)
- In what ways is our building holding us back – and what ways could we be even more of service?
- Have signs/posters on the walls educating on racism, anti-queer, ableism, etc.
- Access is a huge issue for young people – so being centrally located is crucial

Outreach

- Better publicity in local papers
- Something about UUCM in the Union every week
- Continue bringing in diverse members of the community through proactively reaching out to them in ways that meet their needs
- Look for ways to be in the community
- Two different things- who is going to come here and join us and how we are going to be of service in the larger community.

Interfaith

- Maybe we can do official outreach to all the congregations in the area and find a broad enough message that all can agree on.
- Invite other choirs to have a sing festival (not necessarily faith-related choirs)

Balance of Spirituality and Justice

- Hear rumblings of not enough focus on spirituality AND not enough focus on social justice – need to embrace both things and have them available as resources for the community, lots of people needing/wanting both things: maintaining a balance and modeling for the world, bridging the experiential and the intellectual, too

Justice Work

- Clarify that justice work is a spiritual practice
- Active social justice movement, build up activism throughout congregation
- Tools to help us make love the palpable center of all we do
- Align ourselves with just causes in our community and the wider world
 - Oppose the Mine
 - Research needs of elderly people in community who may not have access to services
 - Have a voting forum here or at Sierra College
- Promote Side with Love opportunities for justice – UUA Side with Love program – packaged with skill-ups that we can invite community partners to – without wanting them to come on Sunday. It could supplement the niche justice things we're doing. Connect with live broadcast from UUA.
- Clarification on role of Justice Team vs Task Forces (how to get your justice passion area acted on)
- Curious Café – have topic driven conversations, come and share your perspective or explore an idea; table topics with human guide at each table (ideas for topics: pronouns; privilege; climate; class)

Uplifting Multiculturalism

- So much work to do inside around multiculturalism, discomfort around exploring white privilege; not everyone will have the same viewpoint, people will be at different levels of development and we should meet them where they are
- Have levels of entry for exploration of multi-culturalism and anti-oppression / exploring white privilege – including entry level
- Anti-oppression training
- Do something as a sequel to Mistakes and Miracles – journey toward multiculturalism next steps. Check back on free curriculum from Meadville Lombard (Building the World We Dream About)
- To move forward on multiculturalism, we need a lot of self work. Need to have entry-level conversations on white supremacy, etc.

Support LGBTQ+ Community

- Create a Justice Task Force on LGBTQ+ issues
- Offer a Queer Potluck monthly

Generational Issues

Youth:

- Center on youth
- Make UUCM more welcoming to families with children
- Update our geriatric décor
- Need more caring/helping/supportive people to help out occasionally in Kids Connection Sunday mornings
- Continue to invite youth to get together, provide community-center-like space for youth to hang out, explore a Friday night support/fun group for young people in their teens – invite orgs to be here w/ resources
- Offer support groups for young people during the week – can be themed and lightly facilitated
- Have youth band showcase

Elders

- Balance of reaching out to youth and accepting that we are an older community

Embracing Our Faith / History

- Knowledge of UU history – explore and communicate

Sunday services / Alternative Services

- Need to have message with spiritual inspiration, it's okay to have joy, but I'm not here to be entertained
- More varied form in services
- Offer other non-Sunday morning services that are nature-based (more than only winter solstice)
- Explore a contemporary service-no prayers, no hymns, no up and down stuff.
- Have solstice at Helling library and advertise to the wider community
- Offering other services on Sundays or on other days for youth, families, justice, or the queer community

Priorities (from the large in-person event on 12/10)

(note we did not enough time to process all of the notes and concerns, nonetheless Rene was able to get buy in to these topics as people left)

1. Youth with a balance – multi-gen events
2. Expand to a model outside the Sunday service for youthful energy

--- the priority sheet also captured a thought about access to transportation, but I don't think it was an agreed upon priority.