

March 2023 Listening Circles

Committee on Ministry
First Church in Belmont



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Executive Summary

As required by the Bylaws of First Church, the Committee on Ministry sponsored our annual feedback sessions in March. Our Reimagined Listening Circles with Guided Meditation and Sharing invited participants into the Sanctuary for silent, candle-lit walking on four separate occasions; one zoom session; and a Q and A with the Youth Group. The following questions were posed to all groups:

“What do I want from First Church in the next 5 years?”

“What does the world need from First Church in the next 5 years?”

A total of 82 members and friends participated, with a wide range of years with First Church involvement. Group discussions were an important part of each session.

Our data of direct quotes was collected, analyzed, and assembled into this document. These Reimagined Listening Circles revealed a church community appreciative of a hard year of post-COVID recovery as we returned to gathering in person after a two-year hiatus. The following themes emerged:

Staff Appreciation

- An overwhelming appreciation for our staff and the rich blessings we receive as a direct result of their hard work
- A desire to keep up with UUA salary guidelines
- Kudos for sermons, musical offerings, vespers, small group ministries, Nate’s stories, adult programs, religious education, and music programs for children

Sunday Services and Sermons

- Appreciation for the potency of the music, the power of applicable stories for people of all ages, the relevance of sermons, and Chris as our minister
- A wish for guidance toward deeper spiritual directions
- Strong desire for hybrid services

Connecting With Each Other

- Appreciation for First Church as a gathering place to connect with others, especially those with UU values
- Importance of compassion, support, guidance and fellowship

- Concern about losing touch with older members
- Difficulty for newcomers to feel a part of our community

Communication

- Appreciation for new website, yet report of navigation difficulties and missing information
- Concern about dissemination of incorrect information
- Desire for Unitarian as a forum to learn about staff and committee work
- Cumbersome nature of automated program for requesting announcements

Moral Leadership

- Pride in First Church's role as a strong moral leader in our community and beyond
- Competing opinions as to whether we are doing enough to help heal the world or trying to do too much
- Youth Group's strong support to go carbon negative

Conclusion

Input from participants detailed a vibrant, active congregation with a bright future. We are blessed with a creative, hardworking staff and a committed, engaged community.

As you will see from the report, there are, however, some areas in need of attention and suggestions for improvements. Reverend Chris, the Parish Board, and the staff will use the information in this report to inform their goals for the upcoming year. The congregation will be apprised of modifications as the next church year unfolds.

If you have questions regarding this report, please get in touch. We would love to be in conversation with you. The Committee on Ministry looks forward to continuing our work on your behalf for our Beloved Community.

Who We Are

Committee Members

Kathy Crawley, Chair

Jackie James, Vice Chair

Mary Harrison

Margaret Dunn

David Lind

Laura Vail Wooster

Nick Hausman

June Lattimore

Leslie Kolterman

The Committee on Ministry focuses on the health and the vitality of the ministries of First Church in Belmont, from the minister, lay leaders and staff, to the congregation as a whole. The newly approved First Church Bylaws state, “. . . the Committee on Ministry shall engage with the congregation, both in groups and individually, to solicit feedback about the Church’s ministries and congregational experience. The Committee shall report its findings at least annually to the Parish Board and the Senior Minister, and shall provide a report at the Annual Meeting.” Our charge is to conduct annual Listening Circles to provide a venue for sharing feedback from our fellow community members.

What We Did

This year we provided Reimagined Listening Circles with Guided Meditation and Sharing. The Committee on Ministry is very grateful to Reverend Chris for the suggestion of this new procedure and for his supportive assistance in structuring them. Three sessions were held in the Sanctuary; one session was conducted via zoom; and a group discussion with the Youth Group was facilitated by Raeann Mason, Youth Group Director. We are indebted to Raeann for providing the opportunity for Youth Group participation, as well as designing this year’s invitation poster.

Thank you, Chris and Raeann!

With the exception of Raeann, staff was not involved in the implementation of our groups.

The Sessions

The Committee on Ministry conducted our own Guided Meditation on March 1st, prior to implementing sessions with participants; our data was included in the report as well. Three in-person sessions were conducted on Sunday afternoons, March 12th, 19th, and 26th. Participants were welcomed into the Sanctuary and given instructions for a silent walk around four stations located in the corners of the room. Each was given a candle, then they followed along in a procession to the first table to light the candle and consider the first question. "What do I want from First Church in the next 5 years?" This question was reflected upon while walking to the next table. At this second table, the candle was extinguished before moving to the third table. At this table the question "What does the world need from First Church in the next 5 years?" was asked, the candle was lit again, as each participant continued in procession to the fourth table. This process was repeated for a second time around the Sanctuary. Participants were given 10 minutes to record their thoughts, then joined with another person to discuss what they had observed for an additional 10 minutes. The group then gathered in the Parlor for refreshments and a group discussion. Notes from that conversation and each person's individual notes were gathered, and discussion points were recorded for later analysis.

One zoom call was held on March 28th. Each participant was asked the same two questions, with a virtual candle on screen during the silent portion of the exercise. The group was then separated into breakout rooms for one-on-one discussion, followed by a gathering together for sharing.

Comments were recorded.

Our hope was that this quiet, meditative process enabled participants to go to a deeper level of thought and contemplation when considering the questions of moving forward together as a community.

Youth Group participants were asked the same two questions, and their comments were recorded and shared with our committee.

The in-person and zoom gatherings were facilitated by members of the Committee on Ministry, who scribed comments.

A total of 82 First Church members and friends participated in this process.

In-person participants: 53

Zoom participants: 11

Youth Group participants: 15

Email contributors: 3

Breakdown of Participants

New to three years of connection to FCB: 6

Three to ten years: 13

More than ten years: 48

Participants with young or adolescent children: 11

Themes

Our Reimagined Listening Circles revealed a church community appreciative of a hard year of post-COVID recovery as we returned to gathering in person after a two-year hiatus.

Although we did not pose any questions to discern positive aspects of church life, respondents were effusive in their praise of First Church and its importance in their lives.

The tremendous efforts of our staff to provide a variety of inspiring opportunities for worship throughout the year and their efforts to bring us back together was stated repeatedly. Thus, Staff Appreciation was the first theme that emerged from our conversations. It was followed by suggestions for improvements to Sermons and Services. A third theme was the importance of making our Communications ever richer. We heard concerns about our Communication Strategies, as well as ideas for improvement. The final theme concerned the church as a Moral Leader.

We were honored that Youth Group members participated in our Listening Circle this year. The biggest takeaways from that group were keeping/creating community, reunions for graduated youth, and going carbon negative. Their thoughts are ***italicized and bolded***. This document provides representative quotes from the Listening Circles for each theme.

Staff Appreciation

As noted above, participants raved about the many accomplishments of our very special staff. In every group, participants emphasized the importance of keeping up with UUA salary guidelines and other ways to let staff members know they are appreciated. Respondents related their appreciation for vespers, small group ministries, Sunday services, sermons, and Nate's stories that are for all of us. The value of the wonderful array of adult programs was remarked upon consistently. The music program also received high praise. We, as a committee, also want to lift up a few additions: the delightful outside Sunday morning greetings by Chris and John; the cheerful enthusiasm of Samuel; Simon's modulation journeys to the Doxology; Ian's outstanding range of musical offerings; Nate's inventive children's programs; Wendy's guidance of our youth with OWL; Raeann's talent with teens and technology; Lillian's ever-flowing fountain of ideas; Janice's brain trust of First Church organizational demands; and Luis's loving care of our building.

"I'd like more of the same; I've been here for 13 or 14 years, the first/only intentional humanistic community I have known. Good people, provocative worship services, chances to contribute. Pay the staff well! Keep them!"

"Great music!"

"There are so many wonderful aspects of First Church now, that one thing I would want is that they continue, e.g., continued music programming, Chris to stay (I expect him to) . . . continued excellent adult programs both for fun and personal and spiritual growth."

"Continue terrific adult programs."

"To continue getting what I always get—great music, challenges to my lazier habits of mind, camaraderie, community, Chris!"

"I still love, respect and appreciate the ways that music and children's religious ed programming help FCB kids reach out to the broader world."

"I have been amazed at the thoughtfulness and effectiveness of the staff and involved members at their wisdom, creativity, and energy in providing so much for so many; I do not need more."

Services & Sermons

There was significant appreciation for Chris and staff for the wonderful Sunday services that are inspiring and provide for spiritual worship together. As noted in Staff Appreciation, there was considerable gratitude for how our services are conducted and how meaningful they are in people's lives. The potency of the music, the power of applicable stories for people of all ages, the relevance of sermons, and Chris as our minister, were all lifted up in appreciation. Some participants had suggestions, however, for deeper questioning for new directions. As you will see below, numerous respondents indicated a strong desire for hybrid services.

"There is a tension between members who want the church to be a place where people are comforted and those who want to be pressed into action in church services."

"One problem I have is political issues dominate over spiritual or personal beliefs. Sometimes I agree, sometimes I don't, but there is a uniformity/hegemony of thought I don't care for, so watch out for that."

"Some people view the church as a place to come, have fun and relax, whereas there needs to be more of a focus on bigger, broader issues; people want church as an escape from their regular life. Some people just come to be comforted."

"Enable hybrid zoom services, such as are done in the Jamaica Plain church, now that the church's WIFI will accommodate it."

"We have tremendous potential to bring in people local and virtual anywhere because of technology."

"For those who have underlying medical conditions, make the parlor socially distanced and 'masked only' during services."

"Sunday sermons that make me think and instill openness to different opinions, religions, and other perspectives"

"How about a sermon on panentheism? What is it? Chris mentioned it during candidating week."

"I wish for more depth in sermons and prayers, as well as direction for spiritual paths."

"I would like sermons on different religions to broaden my thinking and perspective. Could other faith leaders be guest speakers?"

"More intellectual and philosophical sermons"

"I can imagine the church continuing/emphasizing music in services (by far my favorite part of the services). I think the OWL/Building Bridges/Youth Group are great programs that could continue onward. I would like it if there were more coffee hours with good snacks. I like connecting with people then. I think the social aspect of church is important and one of the best parts (second only to the music)."

"I can let me choreograph the musical."

Connecting With Each Other

It was very clear from all the Listening Circles that people attend First Church primarily for the valuable opportunity to connect with others with UU values. Respondents emphasized the importance of compassion, support, guidance, and fellowship. The church is seen as a "place to nurture and be nurtured; to mentor and be mentored; to heal and be healed."

"Stick with me as I get older."

"Weaving together lives with people I love, especially as aging"

"Small group ministries are a great way to connect."

"It's exciting to meet new people."

"I can imagine the church supporting the Youth Group through reunions and funding. I can imagine the church supporting the efforts of the youth to be active members of the community. I can imagine Youth Group accommodations for the schedules of high school students."

“Be a source of support if I ever go to church for support and in general be open for me.”

“Programs like OWL and Youth Group are highly beneficial and what keeps me coming.”

“First Church can provide a great community.”

“The church can provide a consistent supporting community of people.”

“Planning events to allow me/people to connect with current and former Youth Group members. Continue the Sandy Island tradition.”

“Reunions for Youth Group people who have graduated”

“Youth Group Reunions. It’s sad when people leave Youth Group when they graduate and don’t come back, and I think organized, planned reunions would be a great way to bring us back together and keep that community alive even after people graduate.”

While it was apparent that connection and community are valued aspects of First Church involvement, there was concern that we can do better to make those things easier for people. A consistent theme was concern over losing contact with older members, especially those who can no longer attend in person. There were many ideas for improving connection, as well as a desire for connection with people of different ages. Several participants mentioned the difficulty of coffee hour as a time to engage with others.

“I want a way to know everyone better, starting with names and faces.”

“More fellowship and outreach such as barbecues, hikes, wine-tasting, trivia night, board game night”

“We need more connection and communication especially for people at home.”

“I want the many people who drifted away during COVID to come back; I worry that our ranks have thinned.”

“I want it to be easier to connect with youth and new members.”

“Coffee hour seems to be clique-ish.”

“It can be difficult as a single person to feel part of the community.”

“We missed (and continue to miss) online opportunities to maintain and extend our community, and to include the most vulnerable among us.”

“It’s hard to be new in our church; we need a pathway in for those who are new.”

“I wish we had a church directory.”

“Five years? Figure out how to serve 20-25 year olds.”

Communication

Although most people recognized that much effort goes into communication with and among congregants, (the newsletter, the website, announcements in the Order of Service and during church services), participants expressed a need for improvement. This was a major theme that emerged from all groups. There was appreciation for the redesigned website, especially its visual attractiveness, however concerns surfaced with the difficulty in navigating the website, it not being up-to-date, and lacking information.

“Key information is missing from the website.”

“I need a better sense of what’s going on in the church.”

“I wish there was better communication about what committees exist, what programs exist, etc. As someone new, I feel I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I didn’t know there was a Social Action Committee!”

“We have an information-poor structure.”

There were also concerns about The Unitarian, including that it no longer comes out weekly. The format is unfriendly to some who want the full text of The Unitarian in the email so they don’t have to click to get it. There was a concern of typos and other errors. Several mentioned problems with the automated program for announcements, with it being cumbersome and sometimes giving incorrect information.

“Can The Unitarian link to committee activities so I’ll know what’s going on?”

“Include staff columns occasionally as we used to do as a way to get to know staff.”

“Put out The Unitarian every week and curate its presentation to maximize the most important information; put more resources into communicating with and among members.”

“Staff needs to be better about their emails.”

Moral Leadership

Most of the responses from this area were related to the question “What does the world need from First Church in the next five years?” There were many comments about this in all sessions. Respondents mentioned the importance of continued leadership in the community, especially with regard to racism. The ongoing nurturance of young people was viewed as especially important. Our social action efforts were repeatedly highlighted, as was pride in our community being a place to engage in justice actions collectively, encourage moral guidance, and to practice and teach inclusiveness. Many mentioned the importance of continuing to be a community of kindness and compassion. Others noted pride in our youth and the role they play in Belmont, as well as during service learning trips. It is appreciated that we fund a variety of charities. The question was raised, however, if we are trying to do too much and perhaps a need to streamline, i.e. not just about what more the church can be doing, but also what are we doing that doesn’t make sense.

“Fiercely love and support our non-binary, LGBTQ+ members, particularly the youth and other vulnerable communities, POC, and the elderly.”

“We need a public reckoning around slavery at FCB.”

“To be known as a church that helps others”

“Taking actions that shed light and move the world, inspiring selves and others”

“Stay true to being a church and not a social club.”

“As a privileged community we have ethical responsibilities, including to pay attention to the issue of income inequality and those who are outcasts and despised.”

“Guidance for bringing people together to resolve conflicts within our church and the wider world”

“Support for people in the criminal justice system with UU Mass Action programs”

“The world needs a lot...and much of that need is driven by income inequality and wealth inequality, so how does a privileged community find ways to help without judgment? How do we know what people really need? How do we do both: 1) help individual needs; 2) influence greater society to be more just?”

“Resources to help on climate change, economic injustice, refugees in our community”

“Provide a model of a liberal religious tradition.”

“Perhaps we do less, but more effectively.”

“Carbon negativity. The efforts the church is making toward carbon neutrality are admirable but we need to do more than that and do it quickly. We need carbon negativity before (long before) 2030 if we want to have a chance of making an impact.”

“Committing to going fully carbon neutral and supporting efforts in the town for other plans to become neutral (the high school!). Take an active role in local and Boston-based protests that align with the church’s values (racial justice, climate actions, LGBTQIA+).”

“The church can stop global warming by donating to good causes.”

“The church can try to do the same (providing a consistent and supporting community for people) or try and support the creation of support systems if we don’t do anything ourselves.”

“First Church can take action, not performative but real action.”

“Keep doing what it does—not being a traditional church. Inclusivity and welcomeness but also not pushing values on members and non-members alike.”

“Help work against post-liberal ideology (I read Heather Cox Richardson this morning).”

“Give support to everyone who wants it and use its influence to spread ideas that help the world (climate issues, women’s rights, etc.).”

“The world needs to understand LGBTQ people better before making laws banning things.”

“Carbon negative is the only solution to the current climate crisis. The carbon neutral by 2030 plan is no longer enough for the church to be effective. The church makes claims about what it supports but rarely takes action.”

“Carbon neutrality (could do classes on how to be carbon neutral in your own home? gardens with native plants, etc.) Plus making this a welcoming, comfortable place is important (but I think that’s more of a continuation than an improvement).”

“Continue to be a source of community and engagement in local life.”

“Create better people.”

“Be a 100% green building.”

“The church needs to go carbon negative and work harder to be anti-racist.”

Specific Proposals

Connection Activities

- Potlucks, circle dinners, pizza dinners
- Revival of circle dinners (randomized groups)
- Multi-generational activities
- Support for all kinds of families—single, kids, no-kids

- Support for families in the process of launching kids for both parents and kids
- Activities for post child-rearing constituents
- Events targeting empty-nesters
- More peer-to-peer exercises
- Activities/events that help us deepen knowledge of one another—who we are
- Structured ways for people to connect—especially a struggle for introverts
- Film and discussion nights in person
- Hosting meet-up groups
- More outdoor events
- Facilitate forums for open discussions
- A reading circle which chooses spiritual wisdom texts and convenes once every two weeks before vespers for 45 minutes or so to discuss and meditate on
- Talk about death, dying and other difficult topics
- Expand our youth program
- Have a committee fair
- Request for shorter-term small group ministries
- Unite with people who don't share our values and learn about their viewpoints
- Invite neighbors to FCB activities
- Find ways to attract more single people
- Openness to new people
- We need a champion or guide or welcome team to welcome those who are new.

Services

- After-service chats about the sermon during coffee hour
- Go back to greeting people at the beginning of services
- Opportunity for reflection or talk back after sermon and before service ends
- More singers for the senior choir; succession planning
- The word “church” can be off-putting.

Staff

- Include an intern minister on our staff
- I think a secretary in the church would be an asset to the church community and to the world.
- Ways to get to know the staff better

Coffee Hour

- Make coffee hour friendly, e.g. red cups
- Brand hour between services as crossover between 9 and 11 congregants
- Can we use the hour between services to improve communication, do social action, etc.?
- Speed-dating sessions for coffee hours
- Coffee hours with themes

Social Action

- Active groups that regularly volunteer in Belmont or the greater Boston area to concretely work for 1-3 hours per week, e.g. food pantry, volunteering for Habitat, organizing donations, books for needy school libraries, helping Ukrainian and other refugee families make a home, and Planned Parenthood
- Service trips for adults
- Structure more opportunities for social justice work
- More opportunities for bite-sized activism
- Church-wide social action projects
- Ways to feel of use to this broken world
- Reconstitute a denominational affairs committee to attend to initiatives of UUSC, UUA, UU MASS Action, UU Urban Ministry
- How can we connect to the broader UU organization to maximize our impact?
- Strengthen ties to YouthBuild and Urban ministry

Communication

“Make Fellowship One a one-click login prominent and as soon as you get on the FCB website. Then get feedback on F1 because it is not, at present, meeting some of the needs of the entire church membership. Make F1 a good replacement for the photo directory (or bring back the photo directory).”

- Need for a functioning church directory

Church Space

- Use space more as a way to get back together
- Take care of our building

- Switch gas stove to electric
- More native plants in landscaping
- Fossil free candles instead of paraffin
- Access to FCB as co-sponsor of community events, i.e. merging school gay/straight alliance for potluck and discussion, open mic night, documentary screenings with panels, and story-telling
- Crosses make me uncomfortable; can they be changed? There are at least 27 of them in the church.
- ***I would like for there to be menstrual products in every bathroom (from youth)***

Zoom Events

- Revival of Zoom coffee hours and other Zoom social groups
- Technology could really help us connect with other congregations in other states.

Conclusion

The Committee on Ministry is unequivocally grateful to all those who contributed their time and energy in this community endeavor. The Guided Meditation was a new process, and we appreciate that you jumped with us into something novel.

The quest to help chart a successful course for First Church in the coming years is an ongoing process. The opinions and thoughts you read in this document represent those that were contributed in March, 2023. Because of our recent COVID trials, things are changing and gradually coming back into new patterns. We hope some of the views presented here will influence those patterns.

We believe our Reimagined Listening Circles were successful. Going forward, we want to honor the tremendous successes of this past year, the challenges that were met, and the ones that remain.