

Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing

**Results of the Congregational Survey of
April 2023**

**Summary Report Prepared by the
Congregational Survey Team
appointed by the UU Lansing Board**

February 28, 2024

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing (UU Lansing) Board of Trustees initiated the first of what will become an annual survey of congregants in April 2023. The results are meant to provide information for the Board of Trustees and the church's executive team to help evaluate our progress, as a congregation, on our ministry, and to identify areas in which we need to dedicate additional time and resources.

Multiple choice and Likert scale (from strongly agree to disagree) questions were asked, and spaces were provided for respondents to write comments. We received 94 responses representing approximately 27% of the 329 church members. Although this response rate is insufficient for statistically robust results, the findings provide a rich source of information. The Board and Executive Team received a 27-page report with all the comments in their entirety (with personal or identifying information removed). This is a shorter, summary report.

The results provide an indication of how the respondents feel we, as a church, are meeting the Ends and are connecting with the church:

1. Meeting the Ends: Likert scale responses were generally very positive; 80%-85% of the responses were agreed or strongly agreed. The Ends that received the highest scores were number 5, Working for peace, justice and sustainability.. and number 3, Practice gracious hospitality... The End that received a lower score was number 2, Articulate our faith identity, share it with succeeding generations.
2. Comments related to our meeting the Ends were more nuanced. Respondents wrote that we provide an inclusive and safe place for worship and to pursue our own spiritual paths. There were concerns, however, that we struggle when being inclusive when it involves our willingness to engage or accept practices and spiritual beliefs that are not ours. Some view our outreach programs related to End 5, Courageous Work for Peace and Justice, as impressive, while others see our actions limited to hosting organizations in the church building.
3. Connecting with the Church: There are an impressive 14 different types of activities in the church in which congregants can participate. Likert scale results indicate, however, low participation rates of between 5% and 30%. Attending worship service was the most frequent church activity (60% attend service at least once a month).
4. Comments related to connecting with the church revolved around feelings of engagement, worship service, physical or cognitive difficulty participating, and the religious education program. They point towards common feelings of disengagement from the church and concern for the future, despite strong friendships and sense of community.

Recurring themes that emerged from all the comments were:

1. Strong appreciation for the values that the church holds, and the sense of community in the church,
2. Becoming increasingly disengaged from the church,

3. Respondents' voices not being heard (listened to),
4. Concern about the religious education program,
5. Worship services not providing spiritual or intellectual sustenance, and
6. Worry about the future of the church—membership and church finances.

INTRODUCTION

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing (UU Lansing) Board of Trustees initiated the first of what will become an annual survey of congregants in April 2023. Conducting an annual survey is a key aspect of shared policy governance—the approach to governing the church that is being adopted at UU Lansing.

The annual survey results are meant to provide information for the Board of Trustees and the church's executive team (the Senior Minister, staff and team lay leaders) to help evaluate our progress, as a congregation, on our ministry, and to identify areas in which we need to dedicate additional time and resources.

The survey questions are to:

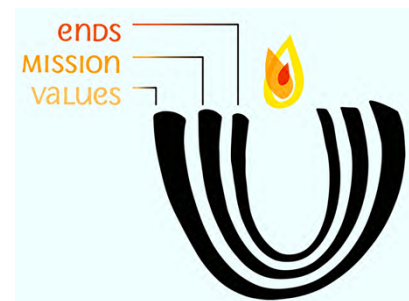
1. Identify how we, as a congregation and church, feel we are meeting the Ends to achieving our goals, and
2. Gather information on congregants' connections with the church.

NESTED BOWLS

Our church adopted a set of Nested Bowls in 2021. The base bowl holds our core Values: Awe and wonder; Love and compassion; and Courageous engagement. The middle bowl is our Mission, what we recite every week during service:

Inspired by awe and wonder we:

- Nurture spiritual growth,
- Connect in authentic, loving relationships, and
- Engage in courageous work for peace and justice.



And lastly the center bowl holds the Ends, or how we hope to achieve our mission:

As congregants of all ages, backgrounds, and beliefs, we:

1. Travel our life and spiritual journeys with integrity.
2. Articulate our Unitarian Universalist faith identity, share it with succeeding generations, and live it courageously in the world.
3. Practice gracious hospitality, reaching across all manner of differences.
4. Connect in loving relationship, and cultivate belonging and inclusion.
5. Work for peace, justice, and sustainability, in partnership with the larger community.

This report provides a summary of the results of the survey including graphs of the responses to the multiple choice and Likert scale questions, and comments from open ended questions.

METHODOLOGY

The survey questions were selected and modified from two existing surveys—the 2022 annual congregational survey of Unity Church-Unitarian of St. Paul, Minnesota that had been designed to meet the needs of its shared policy governance system, and the 2018 congregational survey of UU Lansing designed to provide information for the Ministerial Search Committee.

The survey was publicized in the church’s weekly newsletter several times with a hyperlink to the online questionnaire, and paper copies of the questionnaire were mailed to members who do not receive emails. Those who requested a paper copy were also mailed a paper questionnaire. The online survey required an email address (any email address would suffice) to submit the survey, but the respondent’s name was not required. The email address allowed the survey team to check that no one submitted the survey more than once. The names and email addresses of respondents are kept confidential. Only the small survey team had access to the spreadsheet with names and email addresses. The email addresses and names of respondents have been removed from the spreadsheet and they will not be shared or saved.

We received 90 online and 4 paper responses (90% of which came from members and 10% from friends; several couples share one email address so their responses represent two people). We estimate that the responses received from members represent approximately 27% of the 329 church members (insufficient for a statistically representative sample, but the results provide much information nevertheless). Note that the survey was conducted in April 2023 and the results reflect the respondents’ views at that time.

The responses provide a rich source of information about people’s thoughts and opinions. For example, most of the respondents wrote at least one comment, and many of the comments were long and detailed. The Board and Executive Team received a 27-page report with all the comments in their entirety (with personal or identifying information removed). In this summary report, the comments have been organized into themes and a summary of the comments on each theme provided.

RESULTS

The results of the Likert scale (questions with an agree/not agree response) and the multiple choice questions are provided below in graph form. The bar graphs show the number of responses for each possible answer.

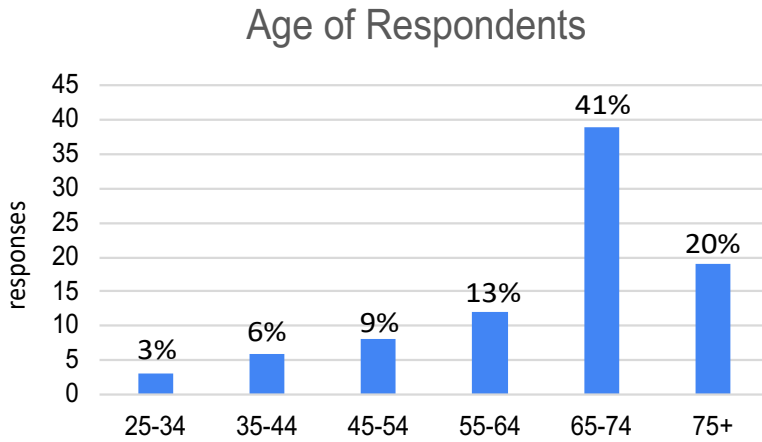
There were also three open-ended spaces where respondents could write comments of any length. A large percentage of respondents—70%—wrote at least one comment. The survey team grouped the comments into themes. The themes that received the most comments (in order of frequency): meeting the Ends of the church; families, children and religious education (RE); the respondent’s engagement with the church; and the future of the church including finances.

The presentation of the results begins with a summary of the demographics of the respondents, followed by answers related to meeting the Ends; participation in church activities; family, children and religious education; and finally opinions about the future of the church.

DEMOGRAPHICS

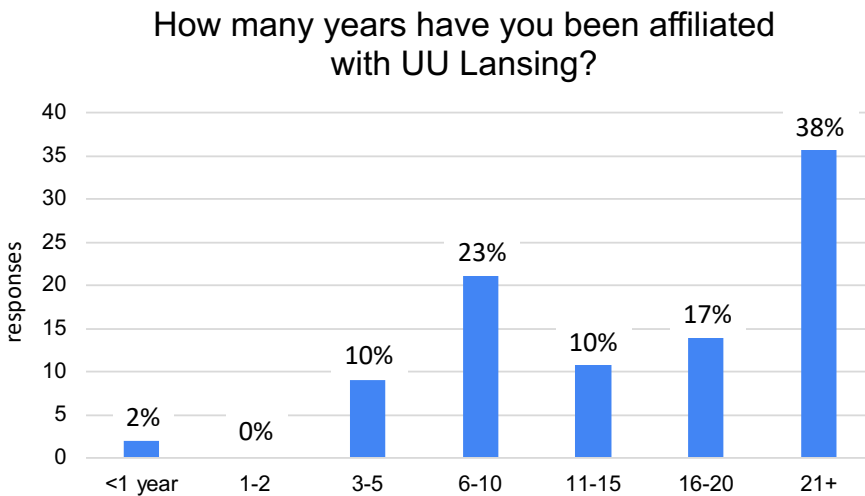
AGE OF RESPONDENTS

The average age of the respondents is 65.



YEARS AFFILIATED WITH UU LANSING

Twelve percent of respondents joined the church in the past 5 years. The other 88% had joined earlier.

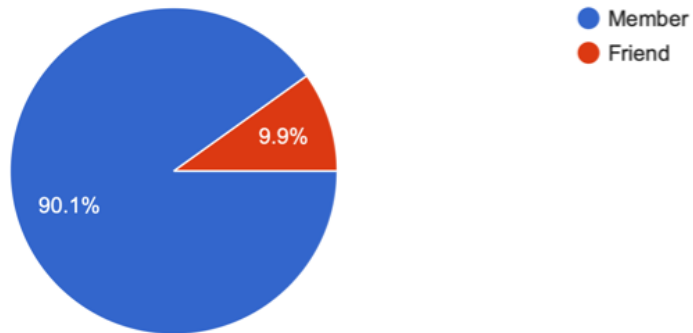


AFFILIATION TYPE WITH THE CHURCH

Friends make up around 10% of those who responded.

What is your affiliation with the congregation?

91 responses

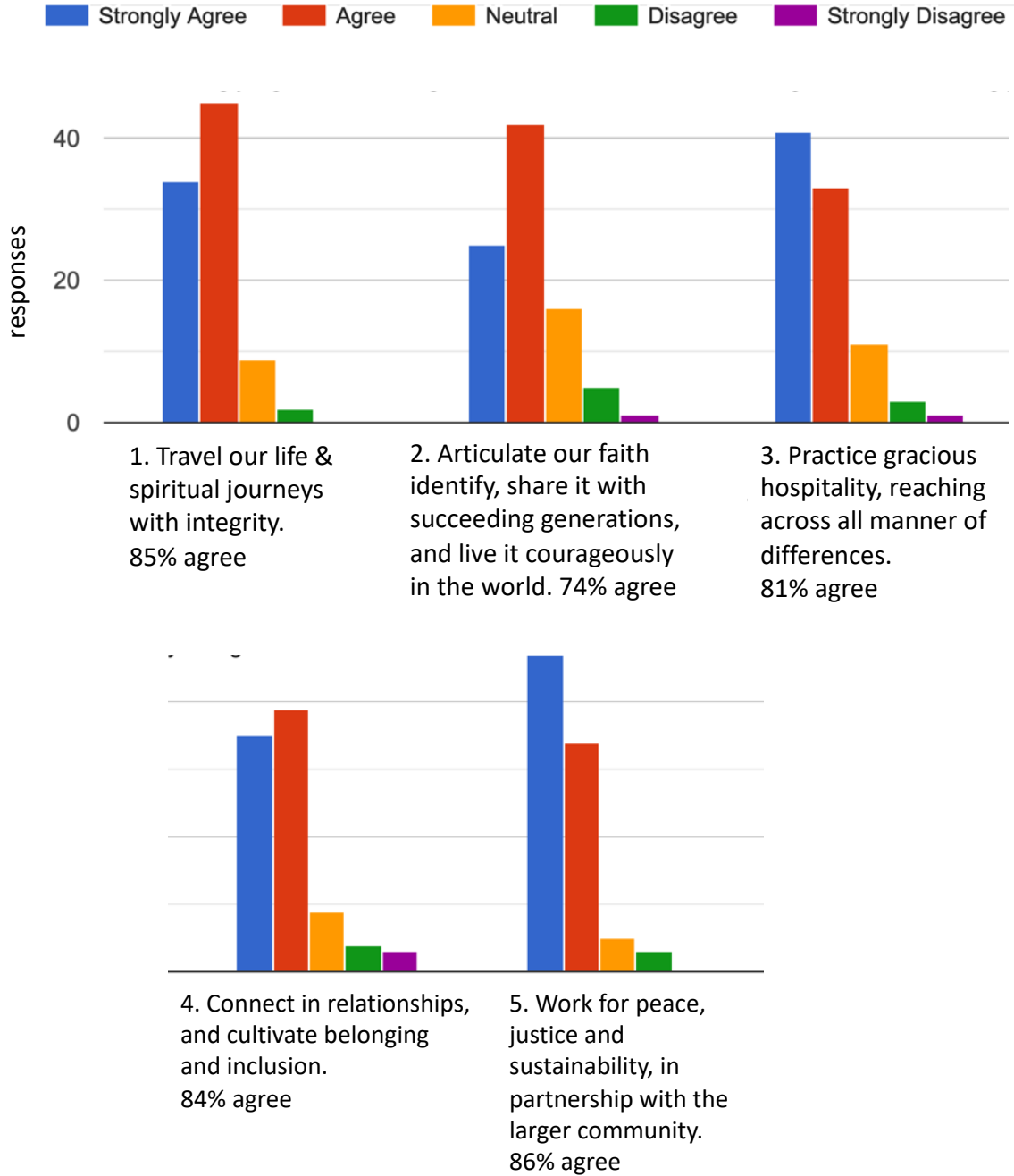


WHETHER WE ARE MEETING THE CHURCH'S ENDS

Respondents were asked to grade, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, how much "we" (undefined) are meeting each of the church's Ends. There was a space after those questions to provide comments.

The responses were generally very positive. Around 80%-85% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that we are engaging in activities that reflect our Ends. The Ends that received the highest scores were number 5, Working for peace, justice and sustainability, in partnership with the larger community, and number 3, Practice gracious hospitality.... The End that received the lowest score was number 2, Articulate our faith identity, share it with succeeding generations.

As congregants of all ages, backgrounds, and beliefs, we:



In general, respondents thought we provide an inclusive and safe place in which worship and pursue our own spiritual paths. However, there also were concerns that we struggle when being inclusive involves our willingness to engage or accept practices and spiritual beliefs that are not ours. In terms of our Courageous Work for Peace and Justice, some view our outreach programs as impressive, while others see our actions limited to hosting organizations in the church building.

Representative thoughts related to meeting the Ends:

1. Cultivating belonging and inclusion, End 4
 - a. We welcome an inclusive atmosphere that provides safe space for many people. It makes me happy every Sunday to see the people who have found us.
 - b. This should include not only commitments to Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ, etc. but also the interests of atheists, humanists and others.
 - c. We need to put the words diversity and inclusion into action.
2. Work for peace, justice... End 5
 - a. I don't see a strong UU presence in Lansing as a leading organization for inclusion, justice and sustainability.
 - b. Some including Rev. Neal work for peace, justice—I see him at meetings.
 - c. It seems like our actions are limited to hosting organizations in the church building.
 - d. I love that there are numerous groups/activities within UU in which to be active.
 - e. The outreach programs are impressive. There are so many people from different backgrounds using our building.
3. General:
 - a. I appreciate the openness and acceptance of one's own personal path/beliefs as exhibited by the minister and the Nested Bowls.
 - b. We struggle when it involves our willingness to engage or accept practices and spiritual beliefs that are not ours.
 - c. I'm proud to be with an organization with strong values, putting them into practice.
 - d. We are moving towards meeting the Ends if not always successfully. We have made significant improvements. We can always do more.

Note: comments related to End 1, Travel our life and spiritual journeys with integrity, are in the section below, Worship Services. Comments related to End 2, sharing our faith with succeeding generations, are found in the section below on Families, Children and Religious Education.

ENGAGEMENT IN CHURCH ACTIVITIES

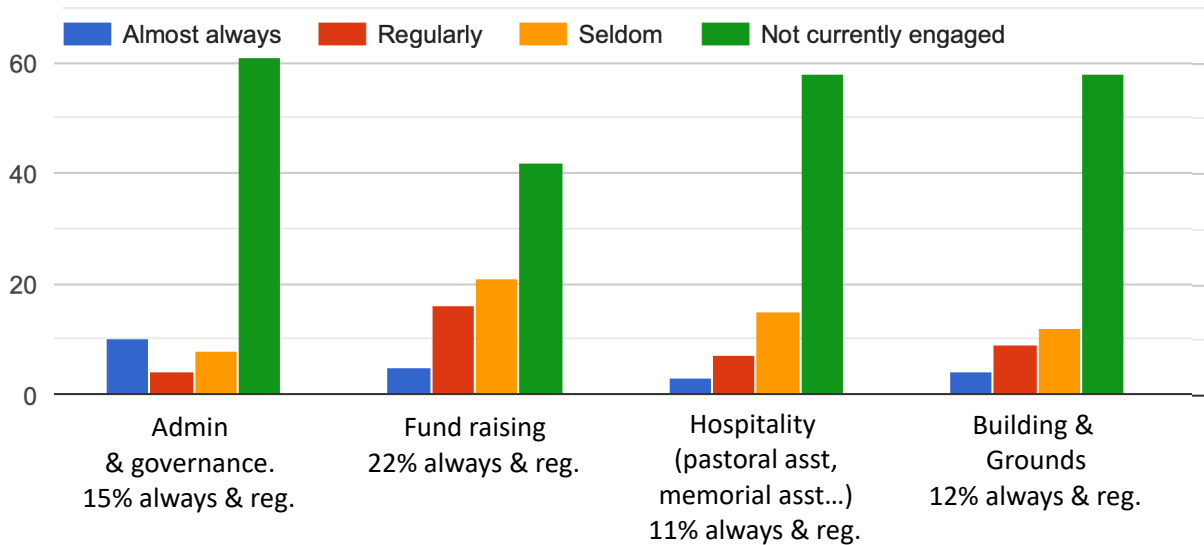
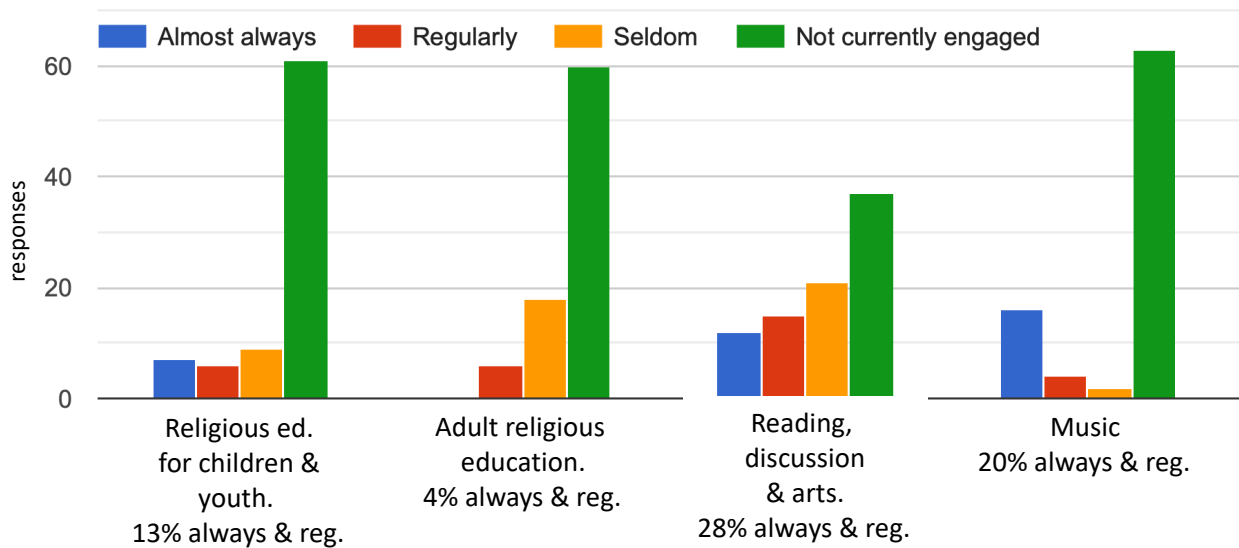
Likert scale questions asked respondents about their level of engagement, from almost always to not current engaged, in the most common church activities. There is an impressive 14 different types of activities occurring in the church.

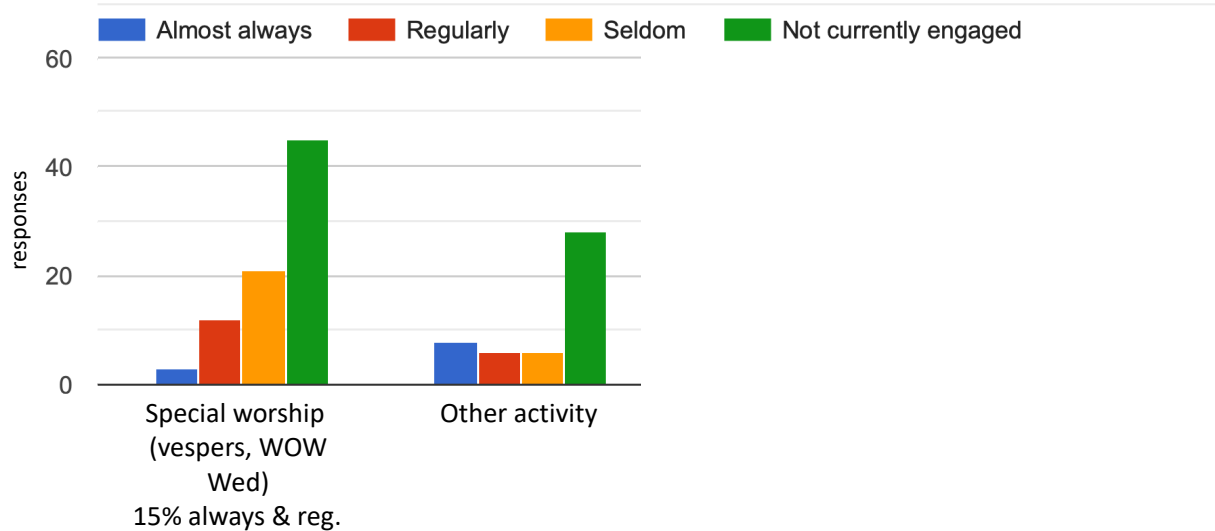
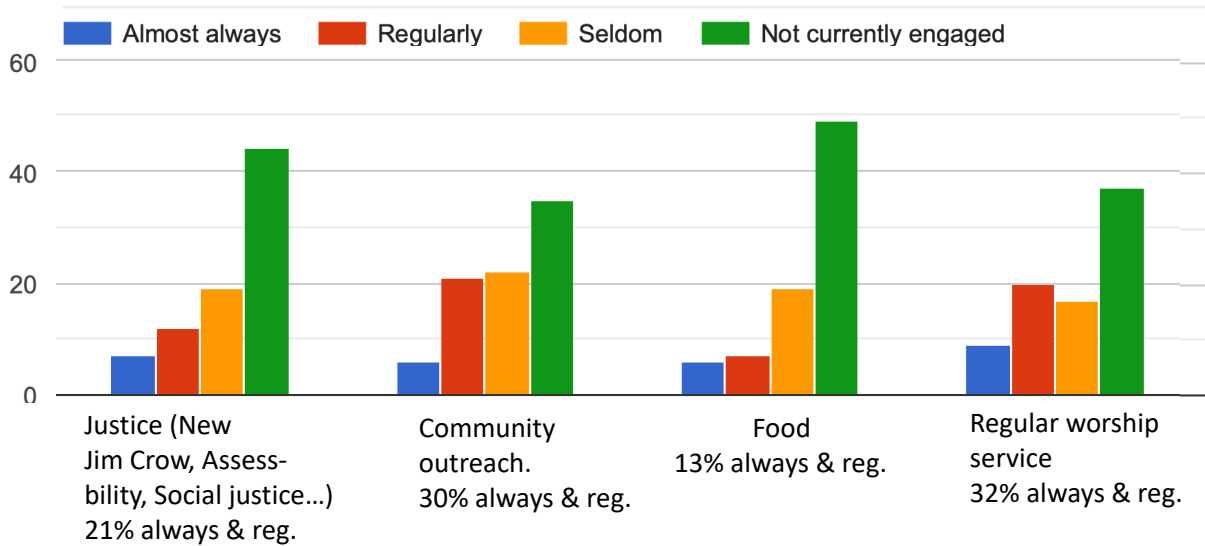
The respondents' level of engagement appears to be low, however, as reflected by the green colored columns on the right indicating the respondents are "not currently engaged." This low participation rate in activities contrasts with the positive responses on whether we, as a congregation, are "meeting the Ends" of the church. The reason for the discrepancy is unclear. However, the low participation rate would point towards efforts to increase members' involvement as a possible future focus of the church.

After attending worship service, the activities that have the highest level of engagement of around 30% are community outreach (Blessing Box, Sharing Sunday) followed by reading,

discussion and arts (Book Group, Forum, Let’s Grow, Semi-Conscious Aging, art exhibits). The other activities, including adult and child religious education and volunteering to assist the church community, garnered from 4% to 20% of the respondents say they are engaged.

WHAT CHURCH ACTIVITIES ARE YOU ENGAGED IN?





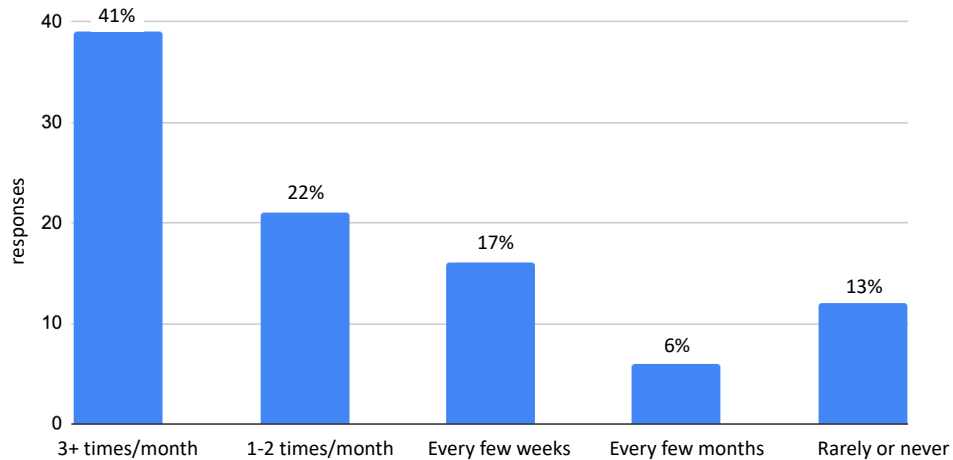
OTHER ACTIVITIES THAT PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN

There was a space for respondents to mention activities that were not listed in the multiple-choice questions. Respondents mentioned: Men's Growth and Support Group; The Pretty Good Book Group; Bike group; Citizens for Prison Reform ; Provide meals for congregants; Special plates committee; UU 175 committee; Archives committee; and CUUPS.

WORSHIP SERVICE

Over 60% of the respondents said that they attend worship service at least once a month.

In the past year, how often have you attended in person or online worship service?



Attending worship service and volunteering to assist in worship service are by far the most frequent church activity of the respondents. Indeed, the first End relates to worship: Travel our life and spiritual journeys with integrity. It is no surprise, therefore, that respondents wrote several comments about worship service.

Representative (edited) comments:

1. I would like to see more blending of the sacred aspect into the worship services.
2. There is not enough catalyst for thoughtful deep dives in a search for meaning of the world or self.
3. I no longer find the Sunday services intellectually stimulating.
4. One of the most meaningful aspects previously at UU Lansing was that congregants were invited to the pulpit. We have many talented people to draw upon for realization of what it means to be a true congregational church.
5. I admire and appreciate the efforts of Pastor Neal to focus on the stated Core of Courageous Engagement, the middle values of connecting in authentic relationships, and engaging in courageous work for peace and justice.
6. Ministerial intern Martha Bogner's sermons are so well written and expressed.
7. The sermons have improved and they are meaningful to me.

Some comments about the music during worship services were written in the open-ended section at the end of the survey. Please note that since the worship services are now publicly broadcast online, the church is restricted to using music that is in the public domain (such as in the hymnals), or music that the church has been granted permission to use or has paid royalties for its use.

1. Music has bent toward traditional churchy hymns. I miss the days when we sang Beatle tunes and Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young ballads in church.

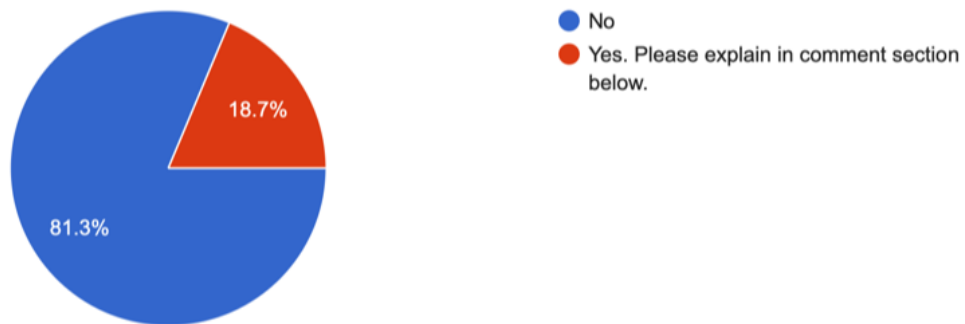
2. We used to have a few standards that were meaningful such as "Let it be a dance", "We laugh, we cry", and "Blue boat home." We once did a Music Sunday when the youth made suggestions, and those songs were requested because they were familiar to them.
3. LB clearly generates the energy for Sunday services.
4. I love the music, especially choir, jazz and folk bands. The guest musicians, choirs, folk group, combos, etc. are wonderful. If we have guest musicians, let's let them lead the music for the entire service.

DIFFICULTY PARTICIPATING IN CHURCH ACTIVITIES

Almost 20% of respondents said that they cannot participate as they would like in church activities because of a physical, cognitive or emotional condition. This could be one factor explaining low participation in church activities.

Do you have a physical, cognitive or emotional condition that makes it difficult to participate as fully in church life as you would like?

91 responses



Below are some representative comments (edited for clarity and privacy) about having difficulty participating:

1. We suffer from chronic conditions (often related to age) that restrict our mobility, and ability to physically participate.
2. Low energy, low motivation.
3. I have a hearing and/or vision impairment that reduces my ability to participate, to engage with others in a meaningful and enjoyable way, and/or to access materials.
4. We have cognitive or psychiatric challenges impacting our ability to interact and engage.
5. I have concerns about COVID.
6. The times during the day when events occur can restrict ability to participate:
 - a. Driving, especially at night or in the winter, can be difficult.
 - b. Events during the day are not possible for people working during the day (similarly, evening meetings not possible for people working at night).
7. We are too busy with family/ work to actively participate.
8. Having meetings take place on Zoom is a good alternative.

MY ENGAGEMENT WITH THE CHURCH

The open-ended space at the end of the survey generated a large number of comments about the respondents' own engagement with the church. These comments can provide some context for the earlier results showing low participation in church activities. Since this is our first survey to ask about participation in activities, we do not know whether participation is lower than in the past. However, the comments point towards a growing feeling of disengagement from the church, despite strong friendships and sense of community.

Most fell into four categories (below in order of frequency of response). Examples of the comments:

1. Feeling increasingly disengaged from the church.
 - a. Until a couple of years ago, church was the central feature in my life. I have very little interest now.
 - b. I would like to see more engagement within and outside the church by members/friends. Just a few people are doing the work of this church.
 - c. I am tired of not having a voice. Now I volunteer my skills elsewhere.
2. Less engaged because missing aspects of the church that are no longer as present.
 - a. I find myself not as interested in participating now as in the past; perhaps not as spiritually fed.
 - b. Sadly, for the past several years we have experienced a loss of joy and a weakening of that once strong connection.
 - c. I miss the people who have left in the past few years. It doesn't seem like the same lively, engaged congregation anymore.
3. Appreciation for the friendships and the sense of community.
 - a. I have formed a number of meaningful, caring close friendships with other congregants.
 - b. I am so content being an active UU Lansing member.
4. Struggling to re-engage following the pandemic.
 - a. I did not attend church due to COVID, but have recently begun to attend again.
 - b. Struggling to reengage after pandemic.

FAMILIES, CHILDREN, AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (RE)

End 2, Articulate our Unitarian Universalist faith identity, share it with succeeding generations, and live it courageously in the world, is most directly reflected in the church's Lifespan Faith Development and children's religious education (RE) programs.

CHILDREN PARTICIPATING IN RE

Do you have children who are 18 years old or younger?

Yes: 12%

No: 86%

No response: 2%.

Of the people who have children and who responded (10 responses),
60% have 1 child.
30% have 2 children.
10% have 3 children (15 children in total).

Of the respondents with children, half have their children participate in RE at UU Lansing.

COMMENTS RELATED TO THE LIFESPAN FAITH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

The survey was conducted shortly after the sudden departure of the Director of Lifespan Faith Development so the comments reflect how respondents felt that time. Many respondents commented on the effect of the loss of the RE director on children and worry for the future of the RE program, while others stressed the importance of a strong RE program for the long term sustainability of the church.

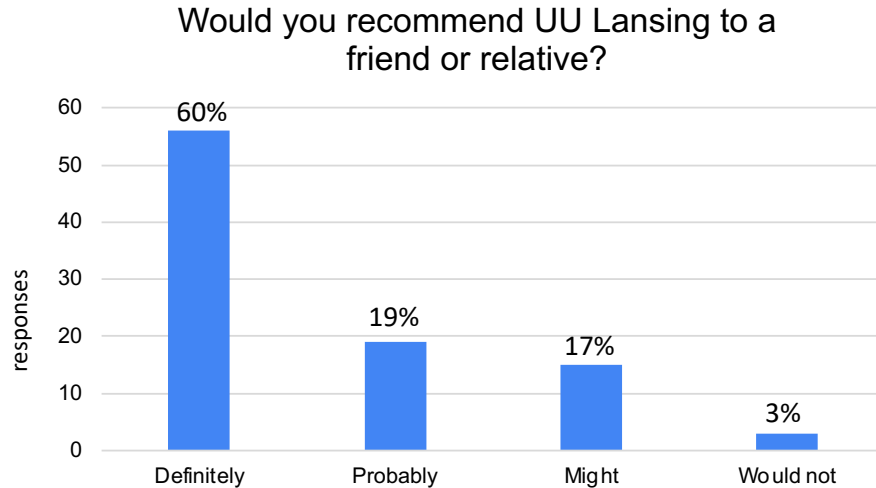
Representative comments (edited for clarity & brevity):

1. Concern about RE, and thus of the church
 - a. The children's RE is struggling. It is not helpful to depend on "run by volunteers."
 - b. I was shocked that our multi-age classroom might be eliminated, thus losing efforts for the 6-11 year olds.
 - c. It is important that the RE program be implemented in a clear, consistent, and organized way.
 - d. If we are lacking a cohesive RE program for more than a few months, many families will no longer feel the church is the place for them.
 - e. A vibrant program for children is what brings new people to church and helps the church grow and be stable.
2. Concern about the departure of the Director of RE/LFD
 - a. There has been no subsequent communication about plans to rehire for this key role, a position that has been budgeted for in 2023 and is vital to UUL's ongoing multi-generational existence.
 - b. Several parents have said that their children are very upset.
 - c. The departure of the DRE has resulted in numerous families discussing whether the minister and board are interested in having a robust, thriving RE program.
3. Desire by RE volunteers to be able to attend service (they cannot because busy with RE).
 - a. I would love to see youth education before or after worship and attend service with my child.
4. Hope for the future of RE
 - a. One solution is hiring a new RE Director. Another is for the RE/LFD team to play a more organized and integral role. I am hopeful we can come together to improve this situation in the coming months and years.
 - b. My optimism will grow as RE/LFD grows within our congregation.

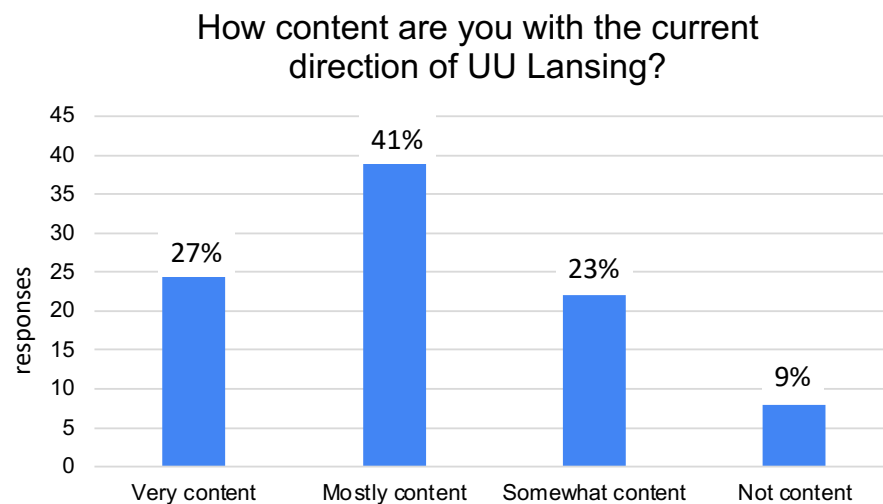
THE CURRENT AND FUTURE STATUS OF THE CHURCH

The following three questions were drawn from the 2022 congregational survey of Unity Church of St. Paul, Minnesota. The results provide an over-all view of the strength of the relationship between respondents and the church, and generated thoughtful comments reflecting congregants strong support for, but worry about, the church.

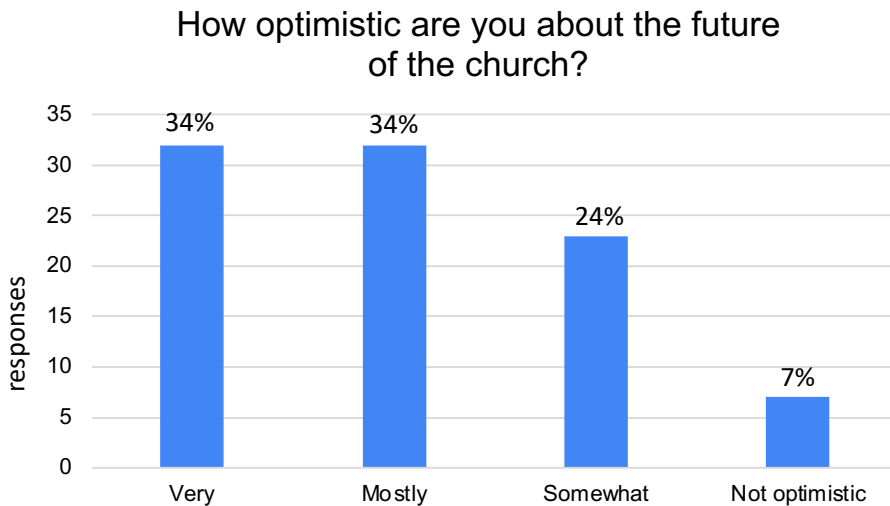
WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THE CHURCH?



HOW CONTENT ARE YOU WITH CURRENT DIRECTION OF THE CHURCH?



HOW OPTIMISTIC ARE YOU ABOUT FUTURE OF THE CHURCH?



THE CURRENT AND FUTURE STATUS OF THE CHURCH: COMMENTS

Several of the sections above (for example, on Families, children and RE, and My engagement) speak to respondents' reflections on specific aspects of the direction of the church. Below are comments related to how well we, as a church, are and will be able to continue in the future to conduct activities to meet the Ends.

FINANCES

Some comments about church finances were written in the open-ended section at the end of the survey, mostly reflecting concern over recurring budget deficits. Representative comments (edited for clarity) are below.

1. Serious pledge drive shortfalls seem a constant worry; painful budget cuts next year look likely.
2. I am very concerned with the financial stability of the church with growing structural budget deficits for the past 3 years, and significant cuts to staff and program expenses.
3. I think installation of solar panels is a high priority and it is not clear how we can finance them.
4. We need to attract new members and donors.

GOVERNANCE, THE BOARD, LEADERSHIP

The church recently adopted policy, or shared, governance and this generated several comments. Generally, respondents were concerned that the Board and congregation were losing voice and decision-making power, and/ or that the Minister may be taking on too many operational tasks.

1. Policy or shared governance
 - a. I feel that the congregation has too little control over how decisions are made in the church.
 - b. I think the Board has ceded more of their authority than is healthy given their fiduciary responsibility and congregational expectations.
 - c. I am concerned about the ability of the minister (any minister) to handle the increased responsibilities under policy governance.
 - d. I have heard from many who have become disillusioned with changes in church policies. Their voices seem to have been ignored by staff and lay leaders, resulting in painful decisions to disengage from church activities.
2. Communication
 - a. We need to improve communications within the congregation.

GENERAL CHALLENGES THE CHURCH FACES

Some comments about long-term challenges the churches is facing were written in the open-ended section at the end of the survey, especially reflecting concern about the ability of the church to maintain and attract members.

1. The aging of the congregation at UU Lansing and the move of youth to other forms of community building probably means deep changes.
2. I have grave concerns about the location of the church and the ability to draw sustaining, new members.
3. I have concerns about the decline of church culture in general, economic hardships, and rapid environmental changes, but I have hope and faith in this community to adapt creatively.
4. I am worried about the future of the church. I realize times are hard for many churches but am hopeful that we'll thrive in the future.

COMMENTS ABOUT THE SURVEY

Some comments about the survey itself were written in the open-ended section at the end of the survey. Representative comments (edited for clarity) are below.

1. It was difficult to answer the section about meeting the Ends because:
 - a. the Ends are vague and abstract with several possible interpretations.
 - b. I only know some people in the church or only some of the activities that the church does. Those I do know are working towards the Ends.
2. I recommend that the team set up one-on-one interviews with a small number of members to get more comments than people are likely to write.
3. I don't think requiring someone to put their email address on this survey is in the spirit of anonymous feedback. Many people have emails that use their name so they may not answer with complete honesty.