

**Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing
2018-19 Congregational Focus Groups Report
prepared by
The Ministerial Search Committee**

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Questions regarding this report can be directed to the MSC Chair, Susan Rothfuss (susan.rothfuss@gmail.com).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The UU Lansing Ministerial Search Committee (MSC) gathered information from congregants in the fall of 2018, as part of the search for a new, settled minister. An online survey and focus groups were the main methods of information gathering. Staff also participated in interviews with questions on many of the same topics. The Focus Groups described in this report allowed the committee an opportunity to get thoughtful input from congregants that was more in-depth than can be captured easily in a survey format.

Focus groups were held over a two-week period and were open to all members and friends who were at least 18 years old. Congregants registered to participate in 1 of 8 open sessions (with a maximum of 10 participants in each). The Board and a group of ministerial search committee candidates (who were not elected/selected) participated in their own, separate sessions. A total of 79 people participated, with 7-10 participants in each.

Working from transcripts of the sessions, the survey coordinator completed a thematic analysis of focus group responses to identify common views and opinions. Less common observations that offered valuable insights or suggestions were also included. While the search for a new settled minister was the impetus for hosting focus groups, most of the questions did not directly ask about congregants' hopes and preferences for the new minister. Participants also reflected on what defines us as a community, outcomes of the move from our previous location, and goals for the future. From their responses, several dominant themes emerged.

Emergent Themes

- UU Lansing members and friends are an active, dynamic, and dedicated group who do a good deal to make church operations run smoothly. Lay leaders and other volunteers contribute significant time and resources to the church and are accustomed to having considerable influence over church life and business.
- The move from our former East Lansing location to the “new” building in Lansing was a good decision, with many positive outcomes, including achieving the three main goals of gaining more indoor space, more parking and greater accessibility. Participants described few drawbacks, beyond those anticipated.
- With the move complete, congregants are eager to become better integrated in the community and to connect meaningfully with the people and institutions here. Discussions also revealed a desire to provide opportunities and resources for area residents in need, in keeping with our principles and shared values.
- The acquisition of a new building and the considerable cost of improvements has led to some concern about the church's financial health and sustainability.
- Congregants want to increase church attendance and membership. They described attracting newcomers primarily as a means of sharing our unique religion with a wider audience, but also as a means of increasing revenue available for improvement and upkeep of the building, support of valued activities, and (hopefully) expanding the staff.
- The impulse for growth is partly focused on attracting a greater diversity of congregants, especially young adults, families with children, and people of color/racial and ethnic minorities. Participants said they want to see a wider range of racial/ethnic backgrounds and cultures represented in the congregation and are ready to do the work of becoming more inclusive and welcoming.
- We need guidance in our quest to be more welcoming and inclusive, if we are to achieve our goals for greater diversity. Many members and friends are ready to dig in, but there is some apprehension and people are at different places in their readiness to engage in the work. A minister who can provide such guidance, from a place of love and encouragement, can help the congregation harness its enthusiasm and focus its efforts.
- Congregants value the staff and want the new minister to support them in their respective roles. Adding staff to support worship and other activities is a priority for members and friends, and they understand the need to increase the church's operating budget to make that happen.

- The church’s staff and leadership should continue to examine and refine its policies, procedures, and modes of communication to ensure congregants are adequately informed and engaged. For some congregants, unclear policies and procedures, and gaps in communication, have led to the perception that they are “out of the loop,” and missing important opportunities for leadership and full participation in church life. An intentional and strategic plan for leadership development will allow new people, with fresh ideas, and unique perspectives and capabilities to play more prominent roles in church governance and operations.

In addition to the themes identified above, focus group participants shared their hopes and desires for the new minister. The qualities/characteristics they would most value, and functions they envision the next settled minister taking on, were appropriate and in line with how they described UU Lansing as a community, our practical needs and challenges, as well as our spiritual and religious priorities and values.

Participants described the ideal minister as someone who has a genuine interest in congregants, and an easy, approachable style. They want someone who communicates in ways that promote mutual respect and cooperation and support shared decision-making. The quality of worship services, sermons especially, is of great importance to members and friends and they expect the minister to deliver dynamic, interesting, and inspiring sermons that are accessible to a broad range of people. While being “challenged” was mentioned frequently, sermons that blend a mix of intellectualism and spiritualism – “head and heart” – are preferred, delivered in everyday language. Personal qualities that were mentioned frequently included integrity, depth of character, energy, open-mindedness, emotional maturity and humility (an openness to criticism, ongoing learning). Congregants and staff hope for someone who is well-organized, with solid managerial skills, knowledge and experience necessary to provide substantial guidance for increasing diversity and inclusion, and skill at community outreach. The functions of greatest priority to participants are working productively with other staff and lay leaders to deliver unified worship services, supporting and supervising staff, helping to develop new lay leaders, staying abreast of church groups and activities, and raising the profile of UU Lansing by engaging other clergy, community leaders and residents in the broader community.

NARRATIVE REPORT

Methodology

In the fall of 2018, the seven-member Ministerial Search Committee (MSC) of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing (UU Lansing) initiated information gathering activities as part of their charge to find a new, settled minister. Among those activities was implementation of an online congregational survey and facilitated focus groups. The latter allowed the committee an opportunity to solicit opinions and observations about the church and congregants' priorities for the ministerial search that would be difficult to capture in a survey format.

Focus groups were held over a period of 15 days, from September 23 through October 7, 2018. They were announced from the pulpit and in weekly email bulletins for several weeks ahead of the scheduled dates. All members and friends of UU Lansing, 18 years of age or older, were eligible to participate, and most participants registered using SignUp Genius. MSC members were on hand for two consecutive Sundays to assist prospective participants who did not feel confident using the online registration website. Congregants could register to participate in one of 8 morning, afternoon and evening sessions with spots for up to ten (10) participants in each; the MSC offered various times to accommodate varied schedules. The Board of Trustees and a group comprised of candidates who were not (s)elected for the search committee participated in two, separate sessions exclusively for them. Discussions lasted 90 minutes. Eight (8) sessions were facilitated by the Survey Coordinator, and two (2) by the MSC Chairperson, both of whom had prior experience facilitating focus groups. At the conclusion of the two weeks over which sessions took place, a total of 79 people had participated, with groups ranging in size from 7 to 10 participants.

The focus group (FG) protocol consisted of nine (9) questions (see Appendix for the full script) including an introductory question and a closing question (e.g. "Anything else you'd like to share?"), responses to which were sufficiently general to be integrated into the substantive analysis of the other 7 questions. Everyone who attended a focus group received a *Participant Record & Consent Form* at the beginning of the session, which provided basic information including the scheduled length of the session, assurances of confidentiality, and notification that the session would be audio-recorded to assist with filling in notes taken during the discussion. No demographic information about participants was collected.

Thematic analysis of focus group responses allowed the MSC Survey Coordinator to identify views and opinions shared by many participants across sessions; the more often a viewpoint was expressed, or a concern was shared, the more confidence we had that it is representative of the views of congregants outside of the focus groups. Those dominant themes, as well as less common observations that offered valuable insights, suggestions or thoughtful critique, make up the bulk of the report and provide a vivid picture of the church. The report is organized by question, in the order they were asked during the focus groups.

Summary of Focus Group Responses by Question

What about UU Lansing, its staff, and congregants do you think is *most relevant* to our search for a new settled minister? What defines us as a community? Please consider both positive and less positive qualities and characteristics.

Across the focus group sessions, nearly everyone who responded to this question described an **active congregation with a tradition of strong lay leadership**. The word "active" was used to describe several facets of the congregation, including the culture of volunteerism, enthusiasm for shared activities and traditions, the many different groups there are to join, and the various ways we engage with the community. It's clear to even the newest members that volunteers and lay leaders contribute their time and energies in ways that support

worship, religious education, and governance, as well as a variety of other practical and fun activities that enhance church life.

“What I find unique about this congregation is how active the congregants are.”

“...one of the things I appreciate about this church is it seems like there is something for everybody to get involved in: committees, activities, celebrations... It seems like we’re an active church and enjoy doing things together.”

This quality was generally described in positive terms. However, some participants reported that it can be hard to penetrate what they see as an inner circle of long-time members who have been involved in leadership for a long time.

“...yes we have lay leadership, but one of my big concerns is that our lay leadership is narrow, cliquy, in my experience. It’s the same people over and over again. There’s really not a lot of opportunity for people, new voices to get engaged in the leadership of the church, in my experience.”

We are a **friendly, welcoming congregation**. Participants characterized the church as open, inviting, and welcoming. Many find the church to be a place where they build relationships with people who have similar as well as divergent interests and values. Words like “connection” and “community” were mentioned frequently. Several people, both newer and long-time members said that they value what is conveyed by the welcome message at the beginning of service, which explicitly references openness to people of various gender identities, sexualities, religious views and more.

“I love the people here. Most of my friends I met here, and it’s a big part of my life.”

“The welcoming statement makes me proud.”

We are **emerging from an extended period of transition**. Many participants talked about the last several years as a period of transition and change. And, many expressed pride at recent accomplishments – most notably the move from East Lansing to south Lansing.

“I like coming here and no longer feeling guilty that we’re in an inaccessible building. Almost every time I’m here, I see the ramps, all these things... I just, they warm my heart, (I) don’t need to tell the stories, but it (was) an issue for a long, long time, for a lot of us and it was just sort of a release from bondage when we came here.”

“...we kept wanting to pinch ourselves almost, in terms of how we were able to make this such a welcoming place for the people that were here and it was like “wow!” ...this is a way that we’re able to share what we have, reach out to the world, contribute to the broader movement. And it was possible because we’ve got the space.”

And, the congregation isn’t just “house proud,” we are, in fact, **developing a new identity**. There is a feeling that we are on a trajectory of growth and change, and most people see that change as positive, if unfinished.

“I think we’re a congregation going through an adjustment to this new place...we are adjusting to something new. So, we’re different than we were in East Lansing, that’s for sure.”

“I think our move here is a real testament to our values. It’s almost like we are on a mission for rebirthing the church, in a way, to (reflect) the values we espouse. To me it’s inspiring. We don’t know where it’s taking us, but we know we are going in the right direction. That’s hopeful.”

“Yes, we (had) that proximity to the university and to the research and so on...but, we left that little church. There was no way we were going to make that a comfortable place forever and it wasn’t just about space, for me at least. And, I’ve heard other congregants say as well, it was time to get further out. So, I just couldn’t be more proud of when we put that place on the market and really said, “No, we need to go.””

We are **an aspiring congregation, with a strong sense of possibility**. A palpable sense of potential, opportunity, and anticipation of “what’s next?” came through clearly during the focus group discussions. And, that sense of potential and possibility extended to nearly every area of church life. People are excited about recent developments like a large plot on the property that was tilled and fenced, in preparation for a community garden next spring, and they’re eager to renovate the unused portion of the building (practical aspect). Many seem equally animated by early efforts to address racism and increase diversity within our congregation (spiritual aspect), and the possibility that the work will lead to a more diverse congregation.

We are a church that is **beginning to confront systemic racism and other forms of inequity**, in pursuit of Beloved Community. Our church responded to the initial call to host a white supremacy teach-in; it was, in fact, the last service over which our former settled minister presided. Since then, the church has hosted a handful of activities and events (e.g. a morning workshop on welcoming diverse people to the church; an MLK, Jr. holiday service featuring the chair of the local Black Lives Matter chapter). Still, among even the most enthusiastic supporters of greater inclusion and diversity, there is recognition that not everyone is in the same place in their development around these issues. Still others are uneasy about how greater diversity will change the nature of the church and questioning what that means about their own values.

“...the music director from the church in Ann Arbor. He is a very talented person. As a gay man and a black person, he found something really important. He found acceptance and he found a spiritual home and yet he wants to change it. All of these white people evolved and changed and worked to create this kind of religion...then people have guilt about that...it’s complicated. I’m struggling to express it. There is a lot here and a lot going on. There is a lot to think about. I think a lot of people are thinking about it. I thought I stood for this all my life. I thought I was really open.”

We are **a community that takes pride in our diverse religious beliefs** (and no religious beliefs), but we also **take comfort in our shared values**. Several participants said that being in community with other people who share liberal values is one of the main reasons they attend UU Lansing. This took on added importance for many after the 2016 presidential election. At the same time, participants expressed appreciation of the fact that they need not conform to a creed or specific set of beliefs to be accepted.

“The first time I was here... I asked, “Where is the Bible?” I was told there is no Bible; this isn’t a Christian Church. That was comforting to me because sometimes it doesn’t speak to me. I love it when other religions are heard from. And, no religion.”

“The shared values of the community are important, but those shared values are offset by our ability to function as individuals and to grow ourselves personally.”

Still, **our religious diversity creates some tension** around how “religious” or God-oriented we should be. Some people came to UU to escape the strictures of a religion with which they were previously affiliated and said that explicit religious references or “God talk” makes them feel uncomfortable. Others seemed less concerned about

hearing religious references and language, as long as they could be assured that a diversity of religious/theological views (or lack thereof) are accepted, and that no one's views would be dismissed or ridiculed.

"I think we still have a, I'll call it a tension, not in a negative way, but it's getting the balance of what I think of as the old school humanist intellectual UUs (who thought) Sunday services, if they're good, (were) a thoughtful lecture, to another extreme which is...a more spiritual experience. In the 30 years that I've been in this congregation, I feel like we've done so much to merge those, but there's still tension..."

"I was raised Lutheran. I can roll with it pretty comfortably. I don't feel uncomfortable when people talk about prayer or God or quote the Bible. I just want that to be part of a bigger picture."

Similarly, **there are perceived tensions between intellectualism** (sometimes referred to as "head") **and spirituality** (also referred to as "heart"); congregants value intellectual stimulation, and "being challenged" by the minister (and one another), but also want moral/spiritual guidance and inspiration.

We value music and art. Music has historically been an important part of our programming. People appreciate the different musical groups at UUCGL (folk and jazz bands, women's choir, in addition to regular choir), and the variety in the types of music featured in service. There has been a push to diversify our music even further. Focus group participants expressed interest in hearing more contemporary music and even suggested an alternative service that features modern music might be a draw for young adults and people of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds.

"Where is the gospel band? The rock band? The R & B band? We need to find those folks."

We have experienced, capable and well-regarded staff, who have helped the congregation weather a period of transition that included the move to a new building, the departure of a long-serving settled minister and a little over a year of interim ministry. Participants in focus groups expressed a desire to see the current staff members' workloads lightened with the addition of more staff members (or additional time for existing staff).

Most importantly, the UU Lansing congregation is **ready to welcome and embrace a new, settled minister**. Congregants expressed confidence in the MSC to find a minister who is a good fit for our community and its needs at this exciting time.

In your opinion, what were the most favorable outcomes of our move from East Lansing to the south side of Lansing?

UUCGL's move to its current location in south Lansing was an enormous undertaking. The greatest priorities in the search for a new building were more parking, more space inside the building, and greater physical accessibility for congregants with physical disabilities. Not surprisingly, FG participants most often named meeting those three goals among the most positive outcomes of the move. Participants described the sanctuary as a beautiful, physically welcoming space. Most are pleased that the congregation can now worship together in one service, and that there is just one RE cohort at each level.

"I went a couple of times to East Lansing. Then we moved and that cemented my decision to really consider this as my faith community. It was because it is physically a more welcoming space. It is more open, it is a lot easier to not only park your car, but (also) to physically enter the building. Logistical things, like moving around, using the restroom for folks with different ability levels is a huge consideration. So, just to look at it and feel it, it is a physically welcoming space."

Many participants observed that the extra space creates potential for growth in attendance. Moreover, we are now in a more diverse community, which many hope will facilitate outreach to communities of color, refugees and immigrants, and people from a broader array of socio-economic backgrounds. According to participants, the expanded space and more central, urban location means the congregation is better positioned to live into its values and they pointed to our partnership with the Refugee Development Center (RDC) as an example of one way we are already using our space to good effect.

The process of leaving our East Lansing location and moving to south Lansing (from the protracted search, to the eventual move) brought us together as a congregation, according to some. A few participants fondly recalled working on DIY renovation projects with other volunteers and the opportunities that afforded to get to know people better.

“...the thing for me that made the difference between being an occasional semi-regular person at church, to a very regular, very engaged person who is taking on church leadership in some respects, was the process of preparing this building together. And...being here late at night painting with folks, right? That whole process of quite literally building our church home was very powerful for me, in terms of community building.”

Overall, the move has been positive for the congregation and has fostered a sense of possibility for many that simply did not exist with the East Lansing location. The fact that few members and friends chose to stop attending is a testament to the generally positive feeling people have about the move.

What would you say were the least favorable outcomes of the move from East Lansing to south Lansing?

While focus group participants reported more positive outcomes than negative, a consistent list of drawbacks associated with the move were reported across sessions. While the new location is certainly more central to the Greater Lansing area, it is farther away from some people’s homes. And, while we have developed some new partnerships, as with the RDC, we also lost two long-time partnerships. The Peace Education Center rented space in our East Lansing location for many years and counted, among its membership and leadership, a good many UUs. Likewise, the Ten Pound Fiddle concert series, whose board/leadership includes some UU Lansing members, very frequently hosted their weekly Friday night folk music shows at the old church. Those partnerships were not only reliable sources of revenue, but associations based on overlapping missions and memberships going back many years.

Some focus group participants indicated that it feels harder to get to know others with one (larger) service and that they get a less personal, intimate feeling in the large building. And, a few described the size of the new building as overwhelming, and the sanctuary as cold and unwelcoming.

Purchasing the South Pennsylvania location was a major financial commitment and some people are worried about being over-extended financially. Having so much of our revenue tied up in paying down a mortgage, means other priorities (like adding staff) can’t be addressed immediately. And, it isn’t just money that we need more of to maintain the new location. Because the building is substantially larger, more energy and time must be put into upkeep. The lion’s share of building and grounds maintenance is done by staff and volunteers, who have done quite well keeping up with the added demands, but this has been challenging and is not a viable long-term solution.

Sensing a system operating at the limits of its capacity after the move, the former settled minister elected to suspend some routine programming and activities and place a moratorium on new ones for a period of time. That was likely a wise move, but in surveys and focus groups, congregants expressed a clear desire for one of those activities, Covenant Groups, to resume as soon as possible.

Finally, a few participants pointed out that simply being in a more diverse community won't automatically translate to having a more diverse congregation. This is not so much a drawback resulting from the move, as much as it is acknowledgement of an as-yet unfulfilled goal, one that will not materialize without intentional action.

"We have all this new space and I think we expected to be overrun with new faces and new diversity. We are learning it requires more than just being here. We have to do more to build trust and relationships and to be patient. That is something we are going to have to keep on learning and keep working at."

Thinking about the size of our congregation, would you personally like to see an increase in the number of people attending service at UU Lansing? Why or why not?

There was no question among the vast majority of focus group participants that UU Lansing must grow its membership and attendance. Congregants want to attract new members to share the movement with others- "UUs who just don't know they're UUs," as one participant put it.

"I'd like to grow. More voices in the room, more energy, more talent of other people."

"I feel like we have to grow. I don't know how the alternative works... "No, we don't want more...?""

Of course, more attendees also (usually) means increased financial resources, a point not lost on most in the sessions. Increased revenue *is* a reason many expressed support for increased membership, but more than one person noted that increasing pledging units should never be our primary goal in attempting to attract new members. And, a few participants noted that attracting more people to get more money is not necessarily a straightforward proposition, since more attendees would likely lead to increased spending.

When participants talked about increasing membership/attendance, they were often specific in noting that they would like to see more young adults, more families with children, and more diversity across race/ethnicity and socio-economic status. Lively discussions ensued in many sessions around the question of how to attract more people to the church, and participants shared many ideas. Various forms of advertising, social media, and installation of a more visible sign at the front of the property were among the most common suggestions.

"I think a person could drive by 100 times on Pennsylvania Avenue and never notice the little sign we have. We need a bigger sign."

Some expressed great optimism that addressing a lack of familiarity with UU or lack of knowledge that there is such a church in this area would lead to growth (i.e. If you build it, they will come). Others offered more sophisticated solutions to perceived barriers to church attendance, for the groups we have expressed the most interest in attracting.

For instance, people noted that we could feature more contemporary music, find ways to draw young people in for non-worship activities and hope that they become curious about our services.

"I think we could broaden the diversity of our music. We don't have the kind of music that teenagers like – we don't have rap, we don't have hip-hop. It would be wonderful if we could have bands."

While not everyone agreed about *how* we might increase the size and diversity of our congregation, there was agreement on a couple of points. First, many in the congregation are uncomfortable with any behavior that could be described as proselytizing or attempting to recruit or "convert" people. Second, many congregants

want the minister to play a substantial role in attracting more members by being visible in the community. Many participants indicated a strong desire for the minister to take our message out of the church, engage with the community and participate in interfaith organizations/activities.

When you envision a new minister for UU Lansing, what do you see? What qualities or characteristics would you most value in our next minister?

The most frequently mentioned desirable quality or characteristic for the next minister was strong preaching skills. As many noted, the sermon is the centerpiece of the Sunday service, which is the main way most members and friends experience UU Lansing, particularly when they are new to the church. If the sermons aren't engaging, participants reasoned, folks will not return.

After strong preaching skills, the next priority could loosely be called "people skills." Participants used different words like warm, approachable, and genuine; and many people specifically mentioned the importance of being a good listener. Similarly, they described someone who is good at uniting people and defusing conflicts. Integrity and character are important to congregants, as are emotional depth, maturity, and humility. Participants want a minister who is open-minded and said it's important that the candidate not be done learning, growing and developing as a person or as a minister.

We want a minister who is energetic, with enthusiasm and vitality, passion for ministry, a sense of humor (including about themselves), and who infuses their ministry with joy. And, many participants voiced a strong desire for the minister to engage with other faith leaders and do outreach, raising our profile in the wider community.

"I'd like the person to...work with other faith groups and represent us in the community."

While great energy and comfort with outreach are important, so too is being well-organized, with strong managerial/administrative skills, and the ability to manage staff effectively. Participants want the minister to know what is happening, broadly, to stay abreast of committee activities and provide help/guidance when necessary. Strong leadership skills were mentioned frequently, with several references to the challenge of leading a congregation of strong-willed, independent people. Several participants cautioned that our next minister will need to be confident, decisive, and able to stand behind decisions once made.

"We need someone with confidence because we are a handful!"

"...it would be good to have someone who respects the gifts of the people in the congregation. With so many strong, independent people, you need someone who can hang in there."

Participants will respond well to a minister who introduces new perspectives and encourages a broadening awareness of the world around us. Many people said they want to be stimulated and challenged, with a balance of intellectually engaging and spiritually uplifting content. And, several people noted the importance of making concepts accessible to a wide range of people, particularly as we attempt to grow the congregation. At least one participant noted a tension that imperative exposes. Like most UU congregations, ours is much better educated than the general population and, especially among many longtime members, there is a clear preference for sermons that are scholarly in their tone. While such talks may be engaging for academics and professionals, they are not necessarily appealing to people who are not as learned. In fact, as people pointed out, they can serve to alienate people who are not as educated or for whom English is not their first language.

"I also think that the pulpit keeps us from growing because when you use five and six syllable words – it turns some people off because some people don't understand what those words are. I don't always understand what they are!"

"I think we need to recognize that, historically...this congregation has been very academic, very educated, right? If we want to grow in a broader range of people, we will probably need to experiment with different ways of presenting..."

Participants said they want a minister who is committed to fairness, justice and equity in their dealings with staff, congregants, and others. People talked about this in very personal, immediate ways and more conceptual, global ways. On the more personal side, several people talked about the importance of a minister who is a fair and impartial leader, who will be accessible to everyone and won't "play favorites." More globally, a commitment to fairness and equity will be beneficial as we continue to work more intentionally on institutional racism and other forms of bias. Many people acknowledged that someone who can act as a change agent, a patient but persistent guide, is needed at this point in our development.

"Our new minister has to be able to move us beyond fear. There is always a little fear of changing and recognizing things within ourselves that aren't what we think they are. Our new minister has to help us recognize those things we think are right, but aren't right according to what our shared values are."

"The most important thing for a new minister to understand is we have taken a great risk by moving here. Uprooting ourselves for the big goal of diversity and becoming more involved in the urban community, more involved in the city, becoming more involved with people of lower incomes, than we were in East Lansing... Leading us in that direction and helping us to do that is significant."

One focus group participant articulated a hope that the candidate be more than simply conversant in issues of equity and inclusion, but also able to help us identify ways in which our very structures, policies and norms may or may not support equity and justice, fundamentally. Moreover, they noted, a minister who has personally explored these concepts and who can help us make the church a safe place to have difficult conversations would be a great asset.

"My...goal is that we become a congregation that is at a place where we can have conversations about justice in the world and you know, our, our various views and our various identities, with some level of trust and safety so that people don't feel threatened by those conversations and that we have some practice having those conversations both in the community and within our congregation internally. And I think the part of what I really want out of a minister (is) someone who can model having those conversations in...an informed, and practiced kind of a way. Someone who has done some of that work themselves about their own views and their own perspectives and their own identities with which they walk in the world. I want them to be aware of that and carry them well, right? (To) wear their identities well. And honorably..."

A newer member shared that they began coming to UU Lansing after the 2016 presidential election, alarmed at the divisive rhetoric that had come out of president-elect Trump's campaign and the bad behavior it was inspiring in schools, workplaces, and communities across the country. Newcomers and long-time members, alike, said that in the last two years the church has been a place to affirm and recommit to their liberal values, and to find inspiration for various forms of resistance through activism. But, they are clear in wanting the church to be a separate space, free from the negativity permeating so much of public life. Participants expressed a preference for positive messaging from the pulpit, rather than an angry, reactionary or strident tone. Likewise, they see a distinction between a minister helping congregants understand how our UU principles relate to current issues and explicitly political speech (i.e. directions regarding who to vote for, legislation to support).

“We have a big election in 2020. It’s really important that whoever we have can lead us through that. Leading through love and compassion and understanding. We are a politically active group and whoever we have has to be able to lead with love and compassion rather than (from) a place of anger and shame... We are a church, we are a community, we are not a political organization.”

A smaller contingency seemed to embrace the idea that the new minister would have a strong personal commitment to social justice and inspire us with their example.

“I wouldn’t mind having to bail our minister out of jail!”

Most congregants are aware that our model for pastoral care includes use of pastoral assistants to help the minister address individuals’ needs. Still, several people said they hope the minister will use good judgment in determining when *their* presence or support, rather than that of a pastoral assistant, is appropriate or necessary. And, others expressed the hope that the minister would be in-tune enough with the congregation to be aware of congregants who are struggling with particularly difficult challenges or losses and ready to offer assistance. Other functions that were mentioned included meaningfully engaging with children and youth and periodically teaching adult RE/enrichment classes.

Are there any qualities or characteristics that would make you think a candidate is not a good choice for UU Lansing?

Responses to this question were in many cases opposites to the qualities named as desirable. Congregants do not want a minister who is egotistical, rigid or inflexible, bossy, dictatorial, or dogmatic. In the pulpit, they would be disappointed by a minister who has a dry delivery, or who simply reads their sermons, without passion. Someone who is not sensitive to the connection many congregants have to our traditions and even-handed in introducing changes may meet with resistance.

They indicated they would not like someone who only shares from religious texts, literature and other impersonal sources; they would like the minister to share revelations from their own experiences, allowing congregants to understand who they are as a person. And, someone who views their ministry here as merely a “job” will not have the energy and dynamism we are seeking.

Focus group participants noted that our new location and goals for membership growth and greater diversity mean a minister who is highly introverted, uncomfortable with diverse groups of people or uncomfortable in an urban setting would not be a good fit for us.

A strong Christian leaning is not appealing to the majority of congregants. They have grown accustomed to a wide variety of theological perspectives and traditions represented in worship and are comfortable with that.

What do you believe should be the church’s main priorities or goals over the next 3-5 years? What role, if any, should the new minister play in achieving those goals?

Many of the goals people described centered on being less isolated as an institution: greater visibility of the church, greater integration into our new community, and greater connection to the people and institutions in the area. People want UU Lansing to be more visible in the interfaith community, for the minister to network with peers and get involved with initiatives in the area that are in line with our principles. As noted previously, participants see increasing church visibility as an important part of the strategy for growing membership and increasing diversity and want the minister to take a leading role in outreach.

“The minister has a major role in terms of getting out in front and representing us in that process. The minister is the face of the church.”

“...a real priority for us is to figure out who we’re going to be in this place, with this community and the minister’s critical (to that process).”

Continuing to deal with white privilege/white supremacy culture (within and outside the church) is not only a personal goal of many congregants, it was also identified as a formal goal for this church year by the Board of Trustees. One focus group participant said they’d like to see a similar focus on empowering women and girls. A minister who has experience and skill in these areas could help us build momentum and be more effective in our efforts.

APPENDICES
Focus Group Protocol/Script
Focus Group Participant Guidelines & Consent Form

UUCGL Ministerial Search Focus Group Script

As you know, we're in the process of preparing to call a new settled minister to our church. The search committee has been tasked with selecting the best possible person to serve our congregation, but we can't do that alone. We need to know what is important to you- the members and friends of the church, which is why we're hosting these focus group sessions. Thank you for choosing to be here today to offer your input!

A focus group is a facilitated discussion during which participants are asked to give their opinions on a topic of interest- in this case, what we need to know in order to select a ministerial candidate that will meet the needs of this congregation. While my facilitation will provide structure for the session, our intention is for this to feel as relaxed and comfortable as possible.

As we work through our time together, I will ask you to keep the following guidelines in mind. A complete list of guidelines was included as part of the consent form.

- Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. (You may choose to pass on any given question or to stop participating at any time.)
- The entire session will take 90 minutes.
- The session will be recorded.
- What is said in this session is confidential. It is fine to discuss *your own* thoughts and statements.
- There are no right or wrong answers. We're interested in *your* personal perspective on the discussion topics- that's why we invited you!
- This session is intended to be a *discussion*. Everyone is encouraged to participate!
- The purpose of this session is to understand your viewpoint about our church and the next minister. Participants will express a range of opinions, and that is fine.
- As you consider your responses, know that it's important that we hear what you have to say. It is fine to simply express agreement with a previous response, without expanding upon it. If your viewpoint on a particular question changes, as a result of listening to others, please share that.

Guidelines not on the consent form -- If I sense we're veering off-course, I'll guide us back to the question at hand. If any topics that aren't relevant to our slate of questions come up during our session, but they seem important to capture, we'll record them in our "parking lot", so they are not lost.

In a group setting it's natural for some people to talk more and some people a bit less. However, we are interested in getting everyone's input, and presumably you're all interested in giving input or you wouldn't be here. So, if I feel like someone has contributed their fair share, I may ask them to give others a chance. Similarly, if we haven't heard from another person very much, I may call on them. In either case, my intention is not to embarrass anyone or put you on the spot- but, rather, to balance out contributions to the discussion.

We are recording the session, as I noted. We will use the recordings to be sure we've accurately recorded your input. Recordings will be deleted as soon as transcripts are complete, and no names will be used in the transcripts or report.

Because of the recording, I will ask that you do your best to speak one at a time, so we don't miss anything. Please also be mindful of actions that might not generate a lot of sound in the room but can be very loud in a recording; things like shuffling or crumpling paper, tapping on the table top or table leg.

We will take one brief break at about the mid-point of the session- no longer than 5 minutes, to give folks an opportunity to use the restroom or refresh a beverage.

Shall we get started?

QUESTIONS

Opening Question

Before we begin with our slate of questions, let's go around the table/room and briefly introduce ourselves.

1. Please share your name, and something you value about this church, or enjoy doing here. (5)

Introductory Questions

In gathering survey and focus group data, we're attempting to tell a story about UU Lansing, so that prospective candidates can get a very good sense of who we are as a congregation; our strengths, our challenges, and our aspirations...

2. What about UU Lansing, its staff, and congregants do you think is *most relevant* to our search for a new settled minister? What defines us as a community? Please consider both positive and less positive qualities and characteristics. (10)

In June 2016, we moved into this building, after many, many years on Grove Street in East Lansing.

3. In your opinion, what were some of the most favorable outcomes of our move from East Lansing to the south side of Lansing? (6)
4. What do you think were some of the least favorable outcomes, and why? (4)

Key Questions

One of the reasons we left Grove Street (East Lansing) was to have more space. We wanted to combine our 2 worship services into 1, have adequate parking, and better accommodate people with physical disabilities. And, we have achieved those goals!

5. Thinking about the size of our congregation, would you personally like to see an increase in the number of people attending service at UU Lansing? Why or why not? (5)

The fact that each of you is here means that you're invested in the church and hope to have some influence in the selection of our new minister. Perhaps you've spent some time thinking about what that person might be like. Recognizing that no one person will have all of the qualities you desire, it's important to be able to articulate what's *most* important to you.

6. When you envision a new minister for UU Lansing, what do you see? What qualities or characteristics would you most value in our next minister? (12)
7. Are there any qualities or characteristics that would make you think a candidate is not a good choice for UU Lansing? (4)

I've highlighted the fact that the congregation has been in an extended transition period including the move, followed closely by the departure of our last settled minister, who served the church for 15 years. Times of transition can be challenging, but also present natural opportunities to take stock of accomplishments and setbacks and imagine new possibilities.

8. What do you believe should be the church's main priorities or goals over the next 3-5 years? What role, if any, should the new minister play in achieving those goals? (10)

Closing Question

We've come to the end of our session. Before we wrap up, I'd like to ask...

9. What else would you like us to know or consider, as we conduct the search for our new settled minister? (8)

Thank you so much for sharing your time and your thoughts with us today! The results from focus groups and surveys will be compiled and shared with the congregation and will be used to assemble the congregational record and packet available to prospective applicants. Your input is appreciated.

**UU Lansing Ministerial Search 2018-19
Focus Group Participant Guidelines
& Consent Form**

Thank you for choosing to participate in this focus group. The information you provide will be used by the UU Lansing Ministerial Search Committee (MSC) to select a ministerial candidate who will be the best possible match for our congregation. Please read and follow these guidelines for participation in this focus group session, then respond to the questions below:

- Your participation in this focus group is voluntary. (You may choose to pass on any given question or to stop participating at any time.)
- The entire session will take 90 minutes.
- The session will be recorded.
- What is said in this session is confidential. It is fine to discuss *your own* thoughts and statements.
- There are no right or wrong answers. We're interested in *your* personal perspective on the discussion topics- that's why we invited you!
- This session is intended to be a *discussion*. Everyone is encouraged to participate!
- The purpose of this session is to understand your viewpoint about our church and the next minister. Participants will express a range of opinions, and that is fine.
- As you consider your responses, know that it's important that we hear what you have to say. It is fine to simply express agreement with a previous response, without expanding upon it. If your viewpoint on a particular question changes, as a result of listening to others, please share that.

<p><i>If you agree to participate in this focus group and be recorded, please place an "X" in the box.</i></p>	
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<i>Please do not write in the boxes below</i>	
Session Date:	Session #: