

**2021 Cottage Conversation Summary
An Evaluation of the Ministries of First Unitarian Church
Committee on Ministry
June 8, 2021**

Introduction

At the request of the board, the Committee on Ministry conducted six Zoom cottage conversations in which participants discussed four questions. Out of 110 members and some friends, 36 participated. These sessions provided a forum for a wide range of hopes and concerns to be voiced. Regardless of the participants' optimism or pessimism concerning the church's future, there was consensus that our biggest strength is our connections and commitment to each other. We were forced out of our comfort zone by the pandemic and, having learned new ways of being together, we are now challenged to use them to develop a more positive message of inspiration and to widen our impact in the larger community.

Question 1 - How is our church doing in meeting your spiritual needs?

Answers to this question ranged from "great" to "just not working." Out of 36 respondents, 11 responded positively, 18 neutrally, and 6 negatively. A frequent theme was that the connections among members and friends are the glue that holds our church together, more than any sense of spirituality in the Sunday services or other activities of the church.

Question 2 - What has our church done particularly well in the last year?

There were three areas that were mentioned repeatedly: the various committees of the church (especially the Care Committee and the Peace & Justice Committee) did a good job in serving both our congregation and the larger community during a challenging year; the way that we successfully transitioned to meeting on Zoom showed the resilience, flexibility and strength of our congregation; and small groups in many different formats flourished in our church even though we were unable to meet in person. Many mentioned how much they appreciated the Zoom breakout sessions after each service.

Question 3 - What are the areas where our church needs to improve?

Fifteen of the 36 participants, mostly long-time members, expressed a desire that the sermons be less dogmatic, negative, and political and instead more spiritual, hopeful, uplifting and ending on a positive note that inspires action. At the same time some noted an improvement in the quality of Sunday services in the last few months, following Chip's medical leave in January. Several expressed that we need to find ways to attract a wider diversity of people and to better meet the needs of children if we are to grow and thrive. A handful of participants went so far as to indicate that they see our church entering a period of decline if we don't make fundamental changes.

Question 4 - Have you found a way of coping with the pandemic that we could use in our church life?

Suggested coping mechanisms which might be adopted into our church lives fall into two basic categories. The tangible included increased music listening, using "streaming" to escape, exercising, and most often, being outdoors, whether hiking, gardening, or simply exploring nature. More intangible ideas focused on the pandemic-forced opportunity to step back and take a closer look at one's life. The results of this included simplifying, identifying values, forging new goals, trying new things, exploring activities outside one's comfort zone, and (re) connecting with old friends and new acquaintances for both pleasure and in service to others.

Two ideas kept coming back during all of the discussions: preserving the randomness and small group nature of the Zoom breakout groups during coffee hour and figuring out how to incorporate Zoom into the Sunday service once we are meeting in person.