

VUU MSC Survey Summary Analysis 2021

Our congregational survey provides substantial information about the demographic makeup of our congregation, their expectations for a new minister, and their ideological expectations for Sunday services.

VUU's congregation is aging. Compared with the 2011 Congregational Survey, the median age of the congregation has increased by eight years; indicating a relatively stable membership roster without much addition of younger members. Sixty percent of members are over sixty years old. More than one-third are over seventy. This has the potential to affect membership numbers year over year and the church's fundraising base as members enter retirement. This demographic shift is common among all Unitarian congregations, but is demonstrably visible at VUU.

VUU is also largely made up of well-educated professionals. 83% of members have at least a four-year degree. More than 20% have a terminal degree in their field. This shapes congregational expectations regarding sermons. Members tend to respond to sermons that come from what they perceive as an informed perspective. Purely charismatic ministry is unlikely to be effective at VUU.

Our congregation heavily prioritizes the sanctuary experience. By far, the survey demonstrated that the most important skills for our next minister as "sermon writing and public speaking" and "interpersonal and Communication Skills." VUU members want their minister to be impressive on the public stage. However, our survey also indicates that our congregation has developed an appetite for attending virtually at least some of the time. Services went entirely virtual during the pandemic, and roughly two-thirds of the congregation intends to continue attending virtually at least some of the time. This means that future services are, by necessity, going to be made to a hybrid audience - simulcast between a live congregation and a webcast. This will likely require some degree of comfort with the technological requirements inherent to a hybrid service model and a willingness to experiment with form as the congregation's expectations continue to evolve. Ultimately, this space represents a strong opportunity for growth and innovation for our new minister.

Finally, our survey indicates that our congregation prefers services that de-emphasize traditional religious themes. A substantial percentage of members indicated they were disinterested in hearing about Christian themes on a regular basis, likely a reaction to a recent lengthy series on James Weldon Johnson's "God's Trombones". VUU members like a wide variety of sermon topics, as evidenced by the long-standing congregational practice of a lay pulpit and a welcoming attitude towards guest ministers from other faith traditions. VUU is largely composed of members who have chosen the openness of Unitarianism while leaving a more traditional religious background behind. Sermons that make people feel as if they are returning to their past will be met with a higher degree of skepticism.