

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This project explores how Unitarian Universalist young adults define, understand, and apply their spiritual practices and needs. Gathered from a mixture of 350 interviews and surveys, the data paint a picture of deeply inquisitive, religiously open, and socially committed young people, skeptical about church life and hungry for lived spiritual communities. After exploring the spiritual needs and values of this group, the project moves to understanding how church life, particularly worship – the common heart of Unitarian Universalist spiritual life – speaks to these needs of young adult Unitarian Universalists. To put it another way, how can a liberal faith tradition like Unitarian Universalism re-imagine its ministry to connect with disconnected young adults?

In exploring theology and beliefs with young adults, four major themes emerged. First, young adults report strongly held individual beliefs AND feel deeply connected to a community. Second, God is an important reference point, both embraced and rejected. Third, a significant number of young adults place a strong emphasis on being present with the natural world. Finally, there is a strong current of searching, openness and inquisitiveness along with an ability to build a theological whole out of disparate pieces.

In reflecting on their current spiritual communities and practices, three major themes emerged as central: authentic relationships, acceptance and love, and social engagement, both with each other and the world. Young adult Unitarian Universalists are less interested in defining themselves by what they are not and they seek congregations that are religiously open, theologically liberal, and actively working for justice. The theme of seeking individualized experiences within the context of a caring community is a common one. The young adults

interviewed honed in on four important elements of spiritual practice: being in a community of spiritual seekers, transforming the world and oneself, music and rituals, and being in nature.

The final area of exploration invited the respondents to imagine a building a church community from scratch. Who would be there? What would they be doing? What would worship look and feel like? As in other areas the young adults responding spoke of the need for authentic and caring relationships, individual exploration and growth, and committed engagement with the world. The church they would build is a diverse, spiritually curious community who nurtured one another on their individual journeys and holds a shared spirit of hospitality, a tolerance and openness to diverse perspectives, and a deep commitment to social justice.

When invited to choose an activity that felt most important, the young adults focused on the importance of weekly worship, fellowship and connection, and activities that embody their faith and beliefs, particularly service. Overwhelmingly, young adults are looking for worship that is morally challenging, intellectually interesting and emotionally moving. This is, of course, a tall order, but my sense is they are less interested in perfection than in real engagement. There is less hunger for worship as performance than worship as an invitation into a collective conversation. There emerged a clear sense that Unitarian Universalists may be *too* affirming in their worship, too careful in their exhortations. Young adults desire worship that, in the words of one young adult, “challenges me to consider new ideas spiritually or theologically.”

There are, of course, deep contradictions throughout. Respondents want consistent participation without feeling pressured, diverse view points within a shared framework, and challenging ideas that also comfort and affirm. Overall, respondents want to worship with people their own age who share their experiences yet just as often mentioned they are hungry to learn and engage with people who are different. Diversity of people and ideas is deeply important, but within limits so there is enough common cause to unite people.

Yet the young adults surveyed seem to understand and appreciate these contradictions. In many ways their responses make it clear that they hold no illusions of perfection; only a real interest in expanding the limits of the possible.

Like any demographic group within a denomination, young adults are no monolith. The responses from the surveys and interviews of preferences, practices, and needs cover broad territory theologically, liturgically, and practically. Yet even within this diversity of ideas, clear trends emerge: the central importance of fellowship; a fierce sense of independence matched by a hunger for exploration, connection, and openness; the importance of nature as a spiritually-centering modality; and an embodied commitment to social justice expressed collectively.

## INTRODUCTION: So What?

*“Worship isn’t welcoming: the language and people. I’m done. I’m done with Unitarian Universalism. When other people are so cold and undeveloped. I look like the community – in terms of race and class – and STILL I don’t feel welcomed. We need to start by being welcoming.”*

Young adult Unitarian Universalists are leaving their churches in an alarming rate. It is estimated that as many as 90% of graduating high school seniors will never return to join a Unitarian Universalist church.<sup>1</sup> Unitarian Universalists, of course, are not alone in this hemorrhaging. Many protestant denominations – as well as other religious groups – struggle with similar issues. Yet Unitarian Universalism, with its expansive theological tent, diversity of worship styles, and congregational polity offers specific challenges as well as opportunities to speak to the spiritual needs of young adults. But first we need to learn the language.

Many of the Unitarian Universalist young adults I surveyed expressed concerns about how few young people were part of their congregations. 60% of congregations have fewer than ten young adult members between the ages of 18 and 25. In describing what one person would change about her church she wrote, “for the community to be more open to new, young people,

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<sup>1</sup> Neil Shister, “Liberal Evangelists on Campus,” UUWorld.org, UUA, 1 Sept. 2002, 3 January 2010.

and for a greater spiritual component in the young adult group.” Another mentioned, “I would like to feel more part of the whole community without always being the youngest person there.”

Unitarian Universalist churches bemoan the lack of young adult participation yet few take any active approach to supporting a young adult ministry. A 2008 survey completed by Unitarian Universalist congregations assessing their work with young adults (ages 18 - 25) highlights this disconnection between young adults and their congregations: less than a third have a minister providing intentional pastoral care to young adults; 78% do not have a young adult on the worship committee; and only 13% have a young adult on their governing board.<sup>2</sup> Across congregations, the median money spent on young-adult specific ministry and programming was only \$500.

Why are there so few young adults in our congregations? Perhaps there is a cycle at work here: church life does not speak to the spiritual needs of young adults so they do not attend; so churches do not speak to the spiritual needs of the young adults who are not in their pews. Many of the young adult Unitarian Universalists I spoke with shared the difficulty of connecting to worship services at church. One young adult hoped for “more chances to do ‘hands on’ worship with people my own age.” Another asked for “better services – more inspiring, emotional, nurturing; not un-intellectual fuzziness, but not so cold and formal and all.” This need for worship to be both intellectually and viscerally engaging is a strong one. “A big draw for Unitarian Universalists is that we don’t have to leave our brains at the door. But I also don’t want to leave my soul and my heart.”<sup>3</sup>

Why does the involvement of young adults in our congregations matter? Churches, like all communities, are larger than the sum of their individual members. Without the presence of young people, churches are missing an important leveling agent, providing balance and perspective, and witness to an essential moment in human development. The absence of

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<sup>2</sup> “Youth and Young Adult Empowerment Resolution: Year One Congregational Survey Results Report,” Unitarian Universalist Association, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

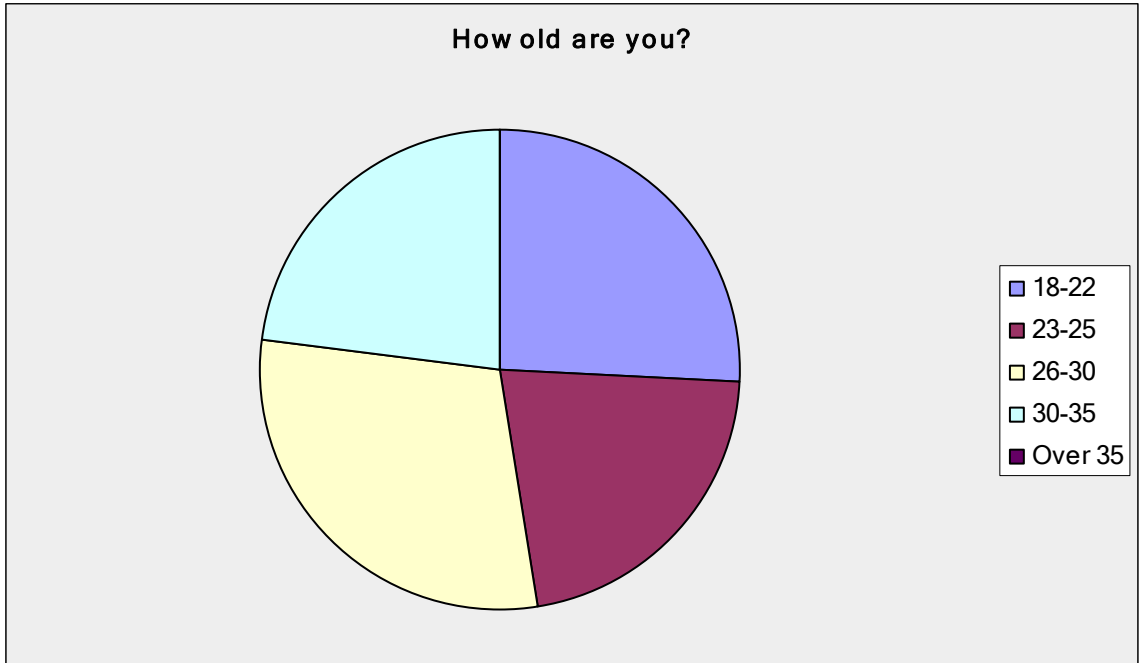
young adults allows for a collective amnesia about an important part of the life cycle. Their presence matters for children too: young adults provide an important model for high school students exploring potential routes into their next developmental stage.

Just as congregations need young people, young people need spiritual communities. While it may not be the congregation of their childhood, faith communities can serve as important places for young adults to try on spiritual identities, explore leadership roles in multigenerational settings, and receive and offer affirming mentoring. Young adulthood is a critical time in the identity formation process where lifelong patterns and values are being molded and adopted. Churches need to support young adults through the transitions common to late adolescence.

As a congregationally based tradition, churches are central to Unitarian Universalism. Ultimately the work of church is about exploring how we live together. More than just Sunday worship, churches are how we live out our religious values. The young adults I spoke with shared how important it is to feel connected, to feel a sense of authenticity, to feel part of something bigger. As one young man described it, “I was in a kitchen at 2:00AM, connected in conversation about how fuckin’ hard high school is. That is where I felt God – feeling connected to love that is the core of the universe.”

## **THE PROJECT**

To better understand the religious life and preferences of Unitarian Universalist young adults, a survey was distributed through congregational and young adult networks, both formal and informal. In just three weeks, over 300 young adults completed the survey. They are evenly distributed across the range of ages from 18 to 35 and largely reflect the geography spread of Unitarian Universalists across the country.



The questionnaire was divided into three sections: the first gathered background information about church involvement and beliefs, the second explored spiritual practices and preferences, and the third invited respondents to envision their ideal spiritual community and worship. The survey included both qualitative and quantitative questions. Respondents were able to skip any questions they wished, although the completion rate was remarkably high.

While 300 is a significant number of responses, they provide only a partial view of young adult Unitarian Universalist life. I assume those with stronger Unitarian Universalist identity and networks were easier to reach and more likely to complete the survey. In other words, the respondents are likely the most highly engaged young adults. While a few non-Unitarian Universalists responded, it would be interesting to broadly survey other religiously liberal young adults – those not currently involved but strongly sympathetic with Unitarian Universalism. The survey data were augmented with several in-person interviews which add detail and shading to the information; the ideas would be further enriched by more follow-up interviews than were allowed by the scope of this project.

Despite these limitations, there are clear trends. What follows are a few of the significant findings and ideas and what they might mean for a young adult Unitarian Universalist model for ministry.

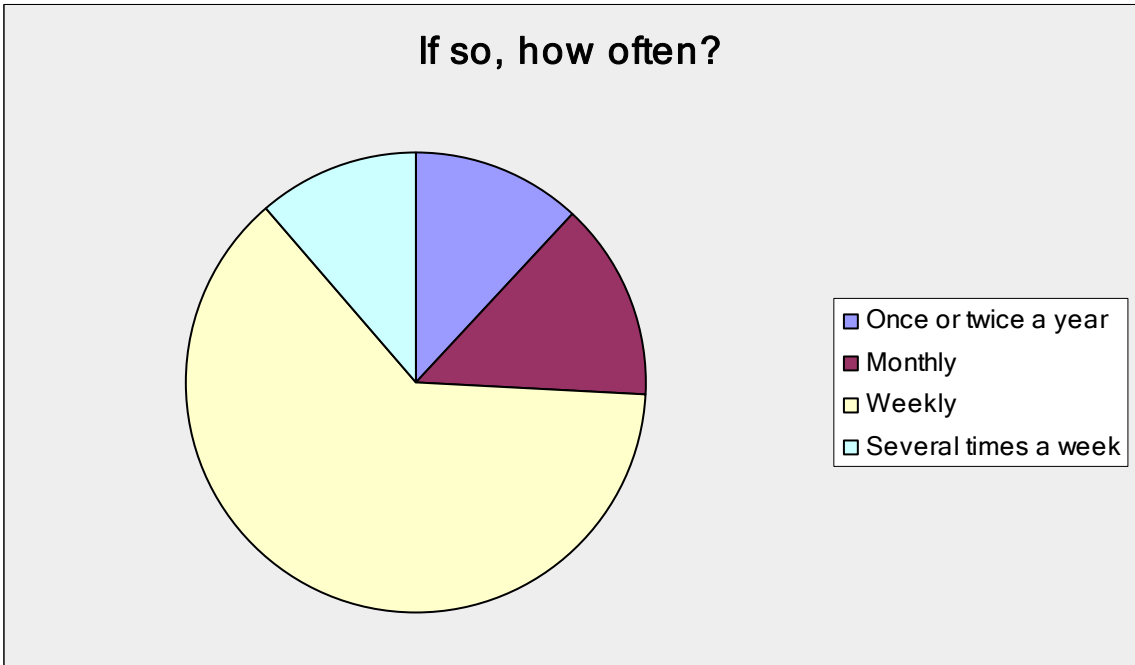
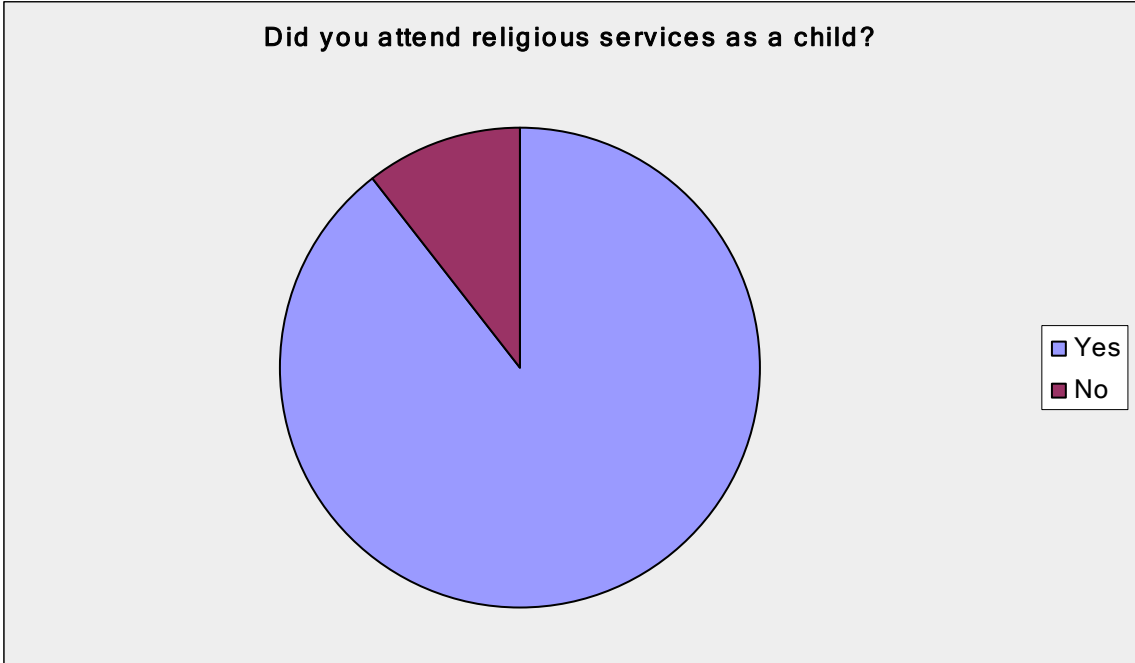
## WHERE I'M CALLING FROM: Background Information

*“Most people consider themselves spiritual and not religious; I consider myself religious and not spiritual. I think that religious practices and rituals are an important component of a full life. For me, that means a range of things: attending services where I can; making time to reflect and give thanks on a regular basis; making sure that there's time and space in my life to serve others; making time for regular readings of texts that I find inspiring, whether they're inherently religious or not.”*

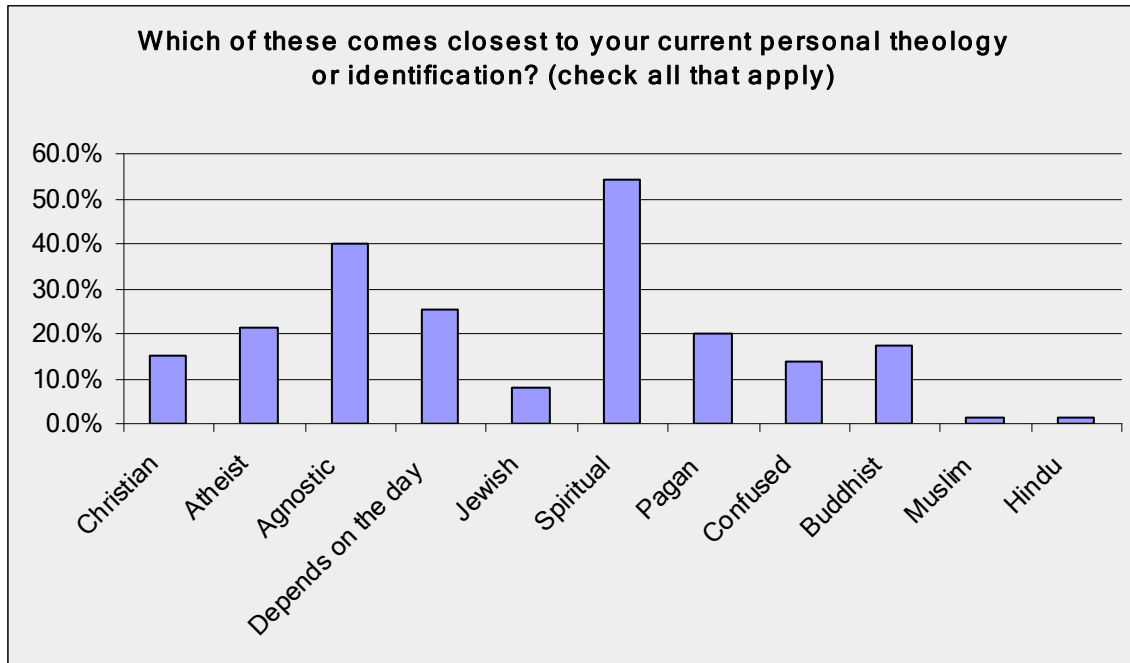
### SUMMARY

*“In a word, what I believe is complicated. There's a reason I'm UU.”*

Respondents were invited to reflect on their historic and current participation in congregational life and current religious beliefs. This snapshot provides an interesting story of high-levels of church involvement in childhood and a broad multiplicity of religious and theological identities. In terms of upbringing, respondents were evenly distributed between those who had been raised as Unitarian Universalists and those who had not. Close to 90% attended religious services as children, with almost 75% attending weekly or more.



Theologically, respondents reflect both the diversity of Unitarian Universalism as well as the inflection point of spiritual exploration where young adults often find themselves. Allowed to choose multiple identifiers, over 54% describe themselves as spiritual, followed by 40% who identify as “agnostic”, “depends on the day” (25%), “atheist” (21%), and “pagan” (20%).



When offered a chance to elaborate about their beliefs, over a third did, many strongly. Several pointed out that “Unitarian Universalist” was not an option they could check and that it should have been. Nor was humanist, a category which was commonly sighted as a descriptor in the open-ended responses. A significant number cited earth-centered beliefs from “Goddess-reverent, quasi-Wiccan” to earth-spirit polytheism. Hyphens appeared a great deal as respondents cobbled together the various threads of diverse traditions.

Although there is an image of Unitarian Universalists as participants in a religious buffet line, picking bits and pieces of spiritual practices from various traditions – I’ll have one sweat lodge, a Passover Seder, and rosary beads, please – there is a remarkable coherency to the variety and diversity. Many of the young adults describe disparate religious identities that make up a greater, coherent whole. From these varied responses, four significant ideas emerge.

First, respondents have strongly held individual beliefs AND feel deeply connected to a community. Unitarian Universalism owes a great deal of its individualism to its Enlightenment roots; yet our congregational polity places tremendous emphasis on values lived within a covenantal community. This tension is not lost on the young adults who responded. A

statement like, “I am constantly seeking my personal credo, with influences from the natural world, my past, and pieces of other religions that speak to me” is quickly followed by, “I really believe in the community that religion provides.” This notion of community is deeply important. As one young person described it, “I am definitely UU because no other religion I've been a part of really accepts any belief system and celebrates community rather than the idea of a ‘God’.” Despite the focus on individual theology and personal philosophies there is an extremely strong current of community.

Second, God is an important reference point, both embraced and rejected: “I believe in God and/or Mother Nature as bigger than we could ever know. I believe Jesus Christ was a great teacher but was not the son of God.” For many young adult respondents there is a belief in something ultimate and a real hesitancy in naming that as God. “I believe that there is definitely a higher power, be that fate or Spirit of Life or God/Goddess, but I do not necessarily need to give that power a Name or face to identify it.” Another wrote, “I believe we have no way of knowing whether or not a god or gods exist.” Some respondents embrace God-language, others reject it. Either way, both groups are responding to an image of God that is an important touchstone to their spiritual identity.

Third, a significant number of young adults place a strong emphasis on being present with the natural world. “UUism doesn't really connect me to nature, so I rely on other resources to help me there. I look to other spiritual practices to help me stay in the moment, as the UUism in my life doesn't provide many.” Whether it be hiking, walking, or sitting near the water, contemplation with nature as a partner is a significantly cited experience and important spiritual connection for many young adults.

Finally, there is a strong current of searching, openness and inquisitiveness – perhaps even joy – within the respondents’ understanding of their spiritual framework. They are searchers: “I've recently come to accept God, but I'm still working out what that means.” Their answers reflect dynamic capacities for exploration, openness, and acceptance. (One young

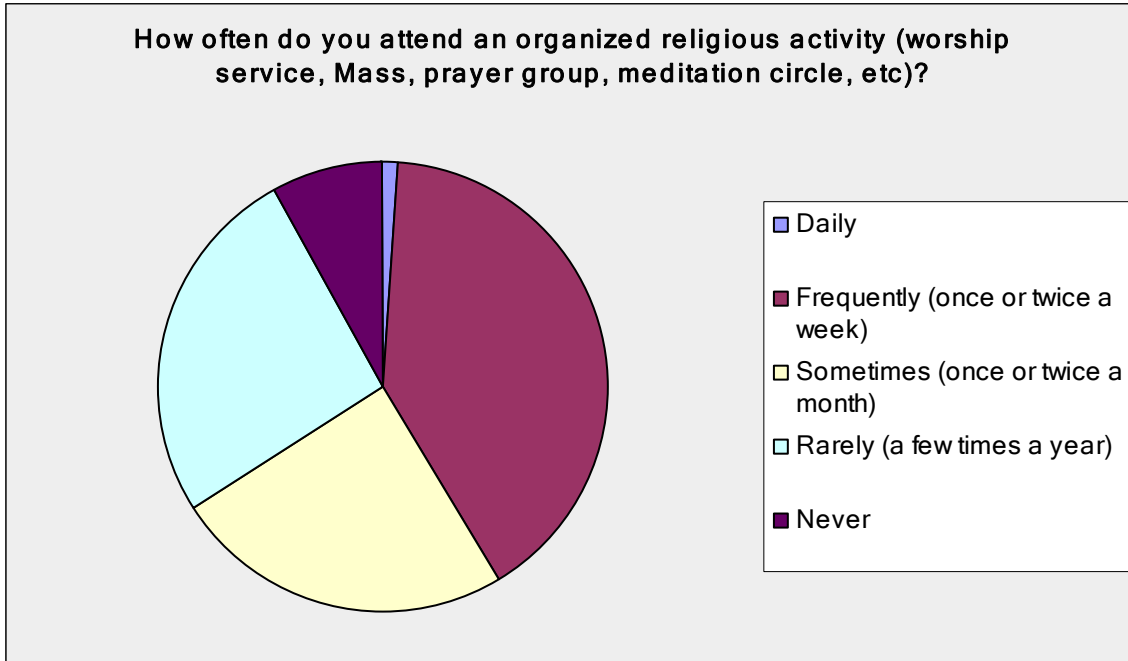
person described herself as a classical Roman stoic; how common is that?). There appears to be a realization that Unitarian Universalism does not have all of the spiritual answers to life's questions and sometimes we need more. "I was raised UU and strongly identify with the faith. However, sometimes there are questions I have that Unitarian Universalism (or local congregations) does/do not provide resources to help me answer, so I look elsewhere. My father was raised Jewish, so I retain that culture."

In describing her religious identification, one respondent wrote, "Light candles to St. Barbara (Christian), Tai-Chi energy movement, Quran readings, Military Chaplaincy Candidate." From afar, this diversity could smack of dilettantism, or worse; but I don't think so. I hear this as a genuine embracing of a spiritual world that is hard to define and limitless, full of possibilities and devoid of boundaries.

#### **CURRENT ENGAGEMENT WITH CHURCH**

*"People, and no pressure to believe anything, just helping you along your own path."*

In terms of participating in organized religious activities, 42% of respondents attend services at least once a week. Another 24% participate once or twice a month with the remaining third going rarely or not at all. Corresponding to these numbers, 64% are members of or regularly participate in a religious community. For most of those it was a local Unitarian Universalist congregation, although this activity is joined with other practices varying from Shabbat services and Catholic Mass to drum circles and Wiccan rituals. I was struck by the number of young adults who mention attending radically diverse religious gatherings (one person alternates between Unitarian Universalist and Seventh Day Adventist churches), without any obvious concern.



When asked to reflect on their current engagement with church the mixture of deep appreciation, uneasy ambivalence, and hunger for deeper connection is palpable. Three major themes emerged when reflecting on their current religious homes: authentic relationships, acceptance, and social engagement.

When asked about what they love about their spiritual home respondents spoke about the people. Certainly the minister matters – someone with passion, commitment, and openness – but also the congregation. “Community; a spiritual, safe space; worship; fellowship,” is one description given by a young adult about what makes church a powerful place.

Young adults appreciate the opportunity for spiritually safe places to explore, disagree, and try on different identities. As one person commented, being “free to believe or disbelieve whatever”. Or as another young adult described it, “inclusive and non-proselytizing: I’m free to believe or disbelieve and can still participate.” Like other areas where individual freedom and a sense of interconnectivity exist side-by-side, a highly integrated community balanced by a respect for individual differences was highly rated. “How friendly and kind everyone was. Feeling welcomed and accepted.”

An opportunity to engage in social justice was also mentioned frequently, usually in conjunction with this strong sense of community. Young adults appreciate those moments where religious convictions are embodied in the world through service. There is an expectation among this group that their church community will take stands, work for justice, and demand engagement of its members. This is a place where there is often disappointment.

What people would change about their current church home falls into similar categories. Overwhelmingly there is a hunger for a larger young adult presence and deeper intergenerational connections. Representative comments include, “more ways for new young adults to get involved with the larger church community,” and “more young adult oriented activities, evening worships.” The increase in young adult participation is connected to creating a community that is more accepting and authentic. “More youth/young adult involvement, more accepting of people who aren't middle class/white/bleeding-heart liberals/recovering Christians.” “Have more people my age who aren't new-age space-cadets who want to go to drum circles or hold hands and sing.” Young adults seek opportunities for small groups and connections. “I feel uncomfortable outside of the young adult group because of the age gap but I don't know how to fix that.”

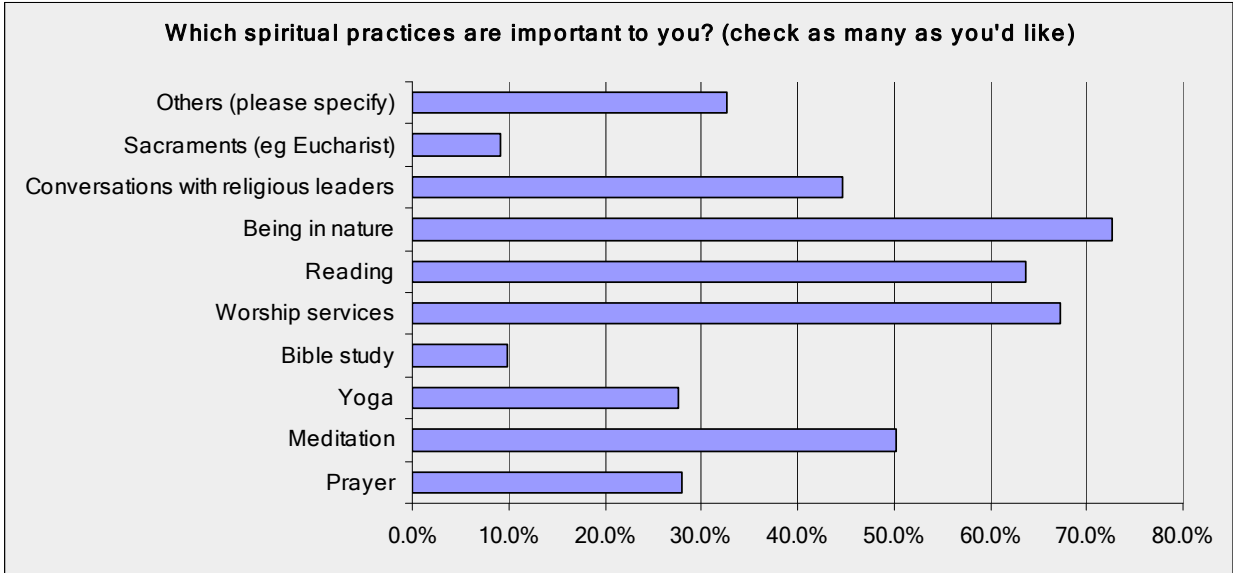
There is also a sense that the theological battles of Unitarian Universalist churches around humanism in the 1970s is of little concern to young adults. “There is occasionally theological conflict between humanists and theists. That conflict has no interest for me.” Similarly, young people want more multicultural, more tolerant and socially engaged congregations. When asked what she would change, one respondent wrote: “Diversify, less New Englandism, WASP-y feelings.” Another hoped for a congregation that is “more genuinely welcoming, less full of ourselves.” “Make it a little less insular against religions that UU is typically disdainful of (e.g., Catholicism).” Young adult Unitarian Universalists are less interested in defining themselves by what they are not – they seek congregations that are religiously open, theologically liberal, and actively working for justice.

## EMBODYING THE DIVINE: Spiritual Practices and Preferences

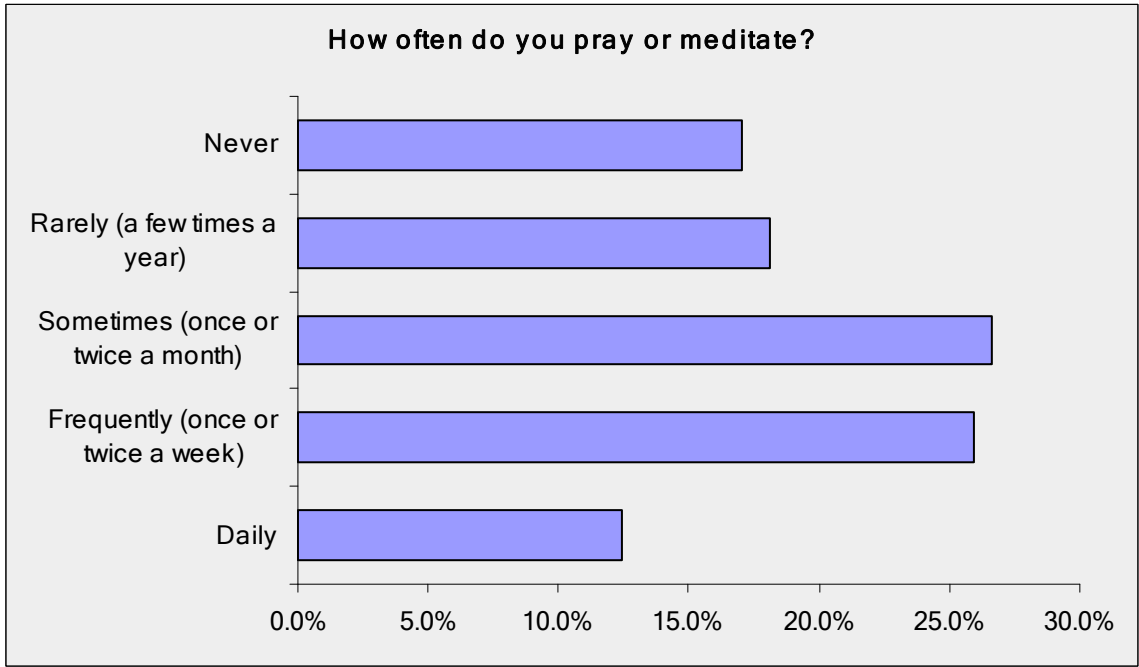
*"I take time to myself to enjoy the things I love and the company of the people I love."*

While certainly a majority of respondents described Sunday worship as their main form of organized religious activities, a significant number talked about walking in the woods, potlucks, small group ministries, drum circles, meditation, and campus groups. The theme of seeking individualized experiences within the context of a caring community is a common one throughout the entire survey and spiritual practices are no different.

A stunning 72% of the young adults surveyed listed being in nature as an important spiritual practice. This was followed by worship services (67%), reading (64%), and meditation (50%). It is interesting to note that three of these could be considered solitary endeavors. Despite this emphasis on solo practices, when invited to name other important spiritual practices (33% answered), the most common responses were about being in community ("conversations with other spiritual or simply thoughtful people") and doing good work ("being a good person, and doing good deeds, even if they go unnoticed"). Music and rituals, particularly those that involved sharing meals and ideas were also frequently mentioned. When asked to name an important practice, one young person replied, "Ritual, I like having symbolic things to do and say."



When asked about prayer and meditation, about a third of respondents (35%) rarely or never engage with the practice, while 27% engage once or twice a month and 38% pray or meditate at least one a week.



When offered an open-ended opportunity to describe their spiritual practices (what you do, when, why), over two-third responded, overwhelmingly speaking to the importance of being in nature and with one another. Many spoke of being part of a community of spiritual seekers,

sometimes through worship but just as often through conversation. “I have been so busy lately that I have been derailed from my spiritual practices, but when I can I attend UU campus worships. Social meetings and fellowship are a big part of my spiritual practices as well. I love being connected to others.”

This importance of community is very strong; many people shared that talking with others, exploring big ideas together, are an important spiritual practice: “My spiritual practices must involve other people.” “I would like to incorporate more spiritual practices into my life. As of now, I hike, write poems, and talk to UU's I love about life, the universe, and everything.” “I'm sort of a community spiritualist,” wrote another, “I like religion for its cultural and communal practices, and I enjoy learning from friends about their religions and partaking with a community of people; I also feel very spiritual in nature.”

Speaking of nature, being out in the natural world, using walks and hikes as a form of meditation and contemplation, was a common refrain. “Being in nature, contemplating my thoughts and feelings, how I fit into the world,” is how one person described it. Similarly, prayer is mentioned by several young adults: “I pray when needed, meditate in nature or in a sunbeam to clear my mind, attend worship when I feel the need.”

There is also a strong emphasis on social justice and self-improvement. As one person described it, “being an activist and engaging in social justice efforts is my spiritual practice.” This commitment to social justice as a spiritual practice comes from a place of feeling interconnected and responsible for the broader world. “For me being spiritual means feeling connected to all living things, and acting on that connection through social justice/action” “I listen to sermons at my church, sing, and write,” observed one respondent, “but my primary spiritual practice is discussion and self-educating, talking about moral/social issues with people of different backgrounds and ideas in an attempt to be a better person with a more true understanding of the world. I am humbled by the insights that I arrive at or are shared with me.”

While it is clear there is a cerebral strand within the spiritual practices of these young adults – “Debate and discuss things. Listen to sermons and then evaluate the issue in my head with the additional context. Think about questions and issues, trying to discover insight into the nuances of them.” – there is also a style of mysticism, of direct connection with the transcendent spirit. “I spend time in worship and prayer regularly in order to build a relationship with God.”

Within this larger theme of being in a caring, engaged community, there is a significant importance placed on individual ethical behavior. “Being a good person all the time and in all moments,” is how one young adult described it. Another wrote, “being kind and striving for the highest possible form of myself as a spiritual act/act of ministry.” This notion of individual choices and practices lived within a committed, caring community runs deep.

## **BUILDING THE BELOVED COMMUNITY: The Ideal Spiritual Home**

*I wish I could find a place where all people could feel comfortable and embraced sharing their spiritual journey and discoveries, authentically.*

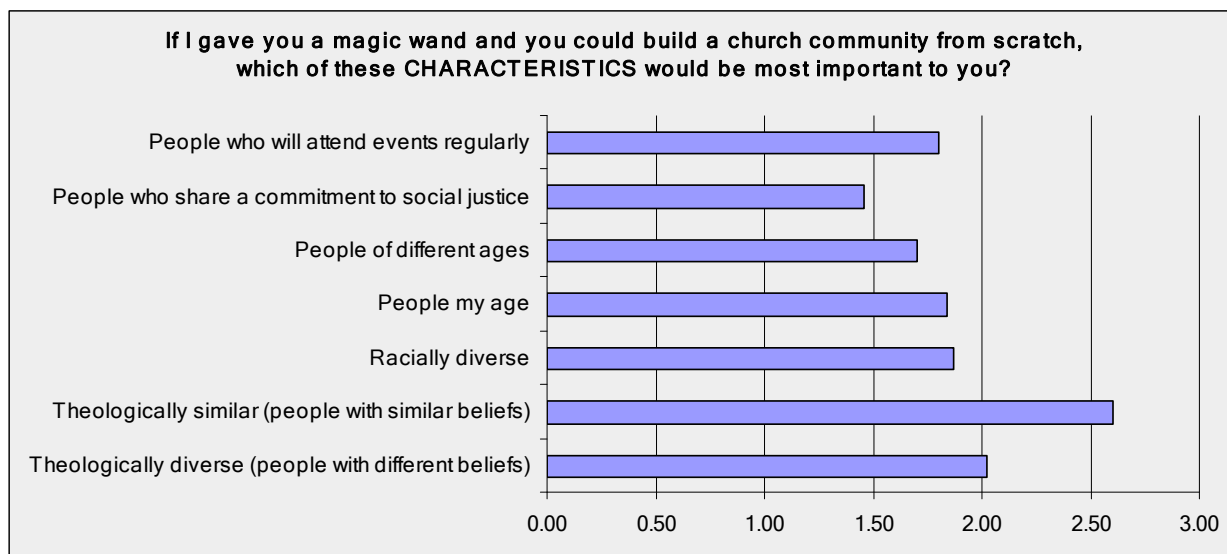
The final area of exploration invited the respondents to imagine a magic wand with which they could build a church community from scratch. Who would be there? What would they be doing? What would worship look and feel like? As in other areas the young adults responding spoke of the need for authentic and caring relationships, individual exploration and growth, and committed engagement with the world.

### **WHO IS AT THE WELCOME TABLE?**

*“A strong sense of community built around a shared commitment to the divine in the world.”*

Respondents first explored ideal characteristics of the church community. In rating the importance of a series of descriptors, a shared commitment to social justice was the highest rated element and being with people who held theologically similar beliefs was by far the least important. The table below shows how various characteristics were rated. Please note that the

scale is from very important (1.0) to not important at all (4.0) so the lower the score the higher its overall importance.



When invited to name the community characteristic most important from this list or their own, respondents returned to similar themes: a sense of commitment and welcome, a commitment to social justice, and a diverse, spiritually curious community. One young adult captured this by wishing for, “people who will attend regularly and who have a commitment to social justice and for whom building a community is not dependent upon having shared beliefs.”

The most frequently cited characteristic was a shared commitment to social justice, integrated into the fabric of the church. As one respondent described, “a commitment to social justice - not just in terms of programming, but integrated into our language, the way we make decisions, etc.” For many of the young adults, this commitment to living their faith with the world outside the church is an important expression of Unitarian Universalist theological roots.

A community of common seekers who nurtured one another on their individual journeys was a second theme commonly expressed. “The absolute most important characteristic would be an accepting environment and encouragement of diversity in every aspect,” wrote one person. Hospitality and a shared commitment to one other seem essential to building an inviting religious community for many young adults. So is feeling safe and supported, what one

respondent described as “the sense of a safe place to express your ideas/emotions/beliefs.” Shared commitment is important too. “Regular commitment,” was named by many respondents. “I think church should be a significant part of our lives so that the relationships can be real rather than symbolic.”

Closely tied to this shared spirit of hospitality is a tolerance and openness to diverse perspectives and deep engagement with other spiritually curious seekers. “Theologically diverse,” is how one young adult described the ideal community. “You can’t get to the truth if you don’t invite all perspectives to the table.” “Theologically diverse but engaged and open to new ways-of-being (in that respect, similar commitment to mutual respect),” is how another described it. “People who are open to having respectful and informed conversations about theological beliefs and issues--don’t have to be similar, just open.”

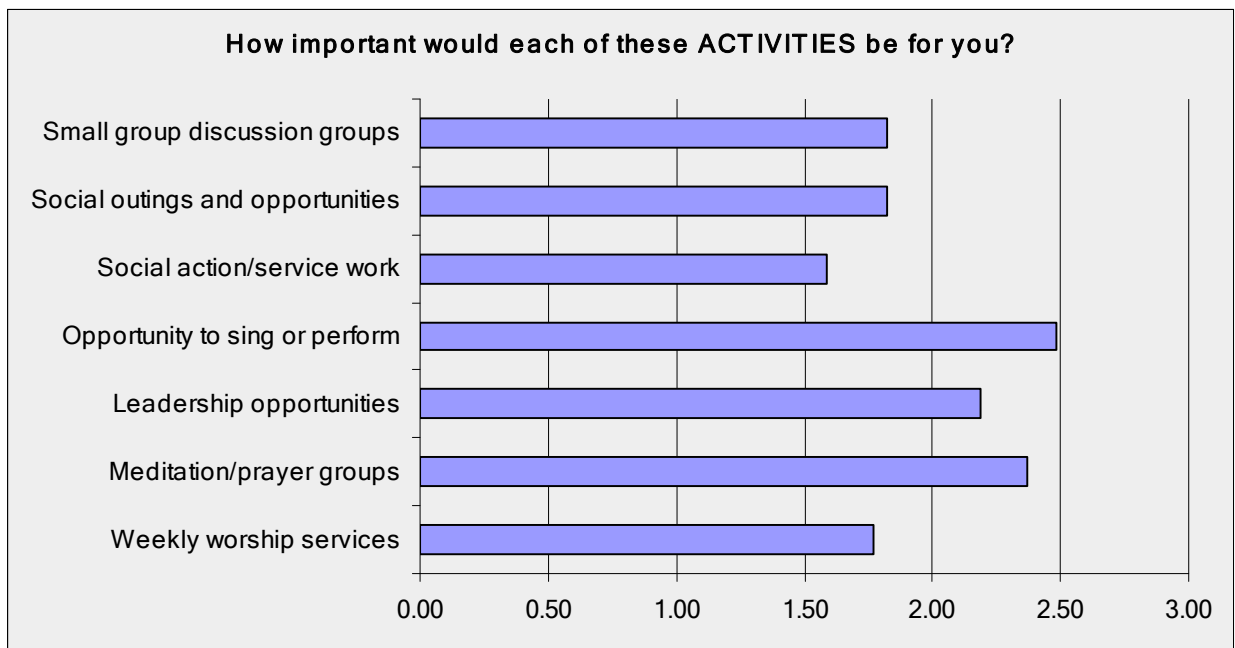
There are, of course, deep contradictions here. Respondents want consistent participation without feeling pressured, diverse view points within a shared framework, and challenging ideas that also comfort and affirm. Overall, respondents want to worship with people their own age who share their experiences yet just as often mentioned they are hungry to learn and engage with people who are different. “I’d like a place that has people my age but is also multigenerational (so I guess it would have to be big enough for that).” Diversity of people and ideas is deeply important, but within limits so there is enough common cause to unite people. “I can only learn and grow from people who bring new ideas to the table for me to consider, but beliefs need to be similar enough to tie the community together.”

The young adults surveyed seem to understand and appreciate these contradictions. “Explaining the seemingly contradictory answer above: the theology would be close enough that people have a shared basis for genuinely spiritual activities, while still allowing enough difference for freedom of thought. Whether that’s possible, I dunno.” In many ways their responses make it clear that they hold no illusions of perfection; only a real interest in expanding the limits of the possible.

## WHAT ARE THEY DOING?

*“A combination and balance of covenant/small discussions groups and time for the entire congregation to be together would be the most important for ensuring the life of the congregation had a stable foundation in personal relationship as well as theological and spiritual exploration.”*

In describing the activities of their ideal church home, the young adult responses followed a similar theme. Social action and service work was rated as most important, followed by weekly worship services and then very closely by small group discussions and social outings. The opportunity to sing and perform was least important, followed by meditation/prayer groups. When invited to choose an activity that felt most important, from the given list or their own, the young adults focused on the importance of weekly worship, fellowship and connection, and activities that embody their faith and beliefs, particularly service. As in the earlier table, the lower the number is the higher the importance.



Weekly worship as a mode of connecting and living as a church community remains an important practice. In naming weekly worship as the most important church activity, one respondent reflected, “I guess growing up with it made it very important for me. A weekly re-centering.” Another agreed, “because that is where I see our church community and where I am

challenged to think in a deeper way. It allows my family to share our faith together when there is intergenerational worship.” Of course what that weekly worship is matters. As one young adult summarized, “weekly worship must be intelligent, and lead by someone who is dedicated to the congregation and demanding of their thought and engagement.” Another said, “note that being lectured to by some guy (or gal) on a stage is NOT something I count as worship!!”

The sense of community and involvement – the social elements of church – was broadly reflected in responses. An ideal church community is “open-minded, diverse, socially and consciously aware, involved in local community and larger world population, interactive, and active, fun, alive, compassionate, empathic.” Another added “supportive, motivated, enthusiastic about social justice, fellowship, passionate.” “Social opportunities are essential to any community,” noted one respondent. “Without bonding in and among age groups, there can be no cohesive community.”

Interactive activities that engage the mind and heart are important to this group of young adults. “Opportunities to engage in ‘hands on’ rituals in a communal atmosphere (community meals/cooking, worship services with lots of sing-along music, group outings to see movies together, etc),” was how one respondent described the ideal church activities. “Small group discussions would be really nice to have on a regular basis,” wrote another. “It feels as if UU’s forget that our religion is predominately based on change of faith and reflecting your beliefs back and forth with others. Let’s talk about it instead of just listening to sermons!”

Small group ministry models – where a dozen or less people gather regularly to reflect together – were cited by many people. This model combines the interest in deep interpersonal connections with theological exploration. “Small groups allow for accountability and a better environment to build an intimate relationship with God,” wrote one young adult. “LGBT folks frequently have a ‘family of choice’ because they’re not so close with their own family for whatever reason; I look for my religious community to feel like my ‘family of choice,’ therefore there needs to be some opportunities for small group discussion (to foster that sort of trust and

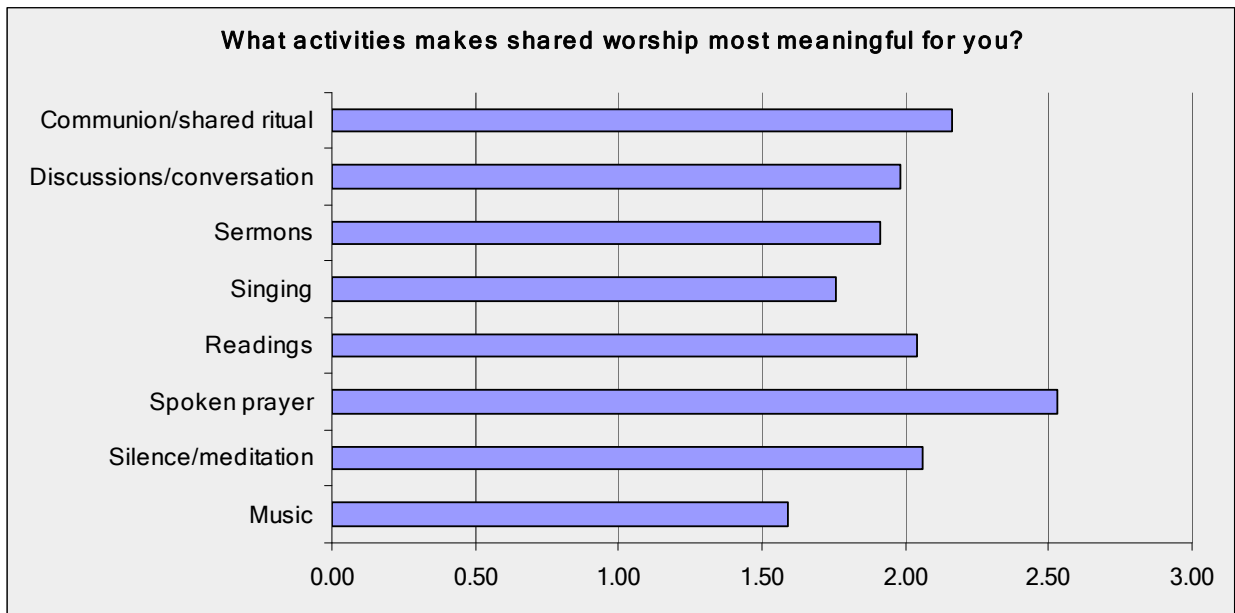
intimacy), opportunities for social outings, and the chance to work together on social justice projects,” observed another.

It is also clear after hearing from young adults that the interconnectedness of these forms of spiritual practice matter as much as any individual activity. In other words, worship may be a very important spiritual activity for a congregation to engage in, perhaps even the most important, but that does not mean that it is enough. “Small groups, weekly worship/gathering, community service/social justice,” wrote one person. “Activities that foster a sense of trust and community and opportunity to develop one’s personal beliefs,” wrote another. As one respondent put it when asked which activity is most important in an ideal church community: “ALL!”

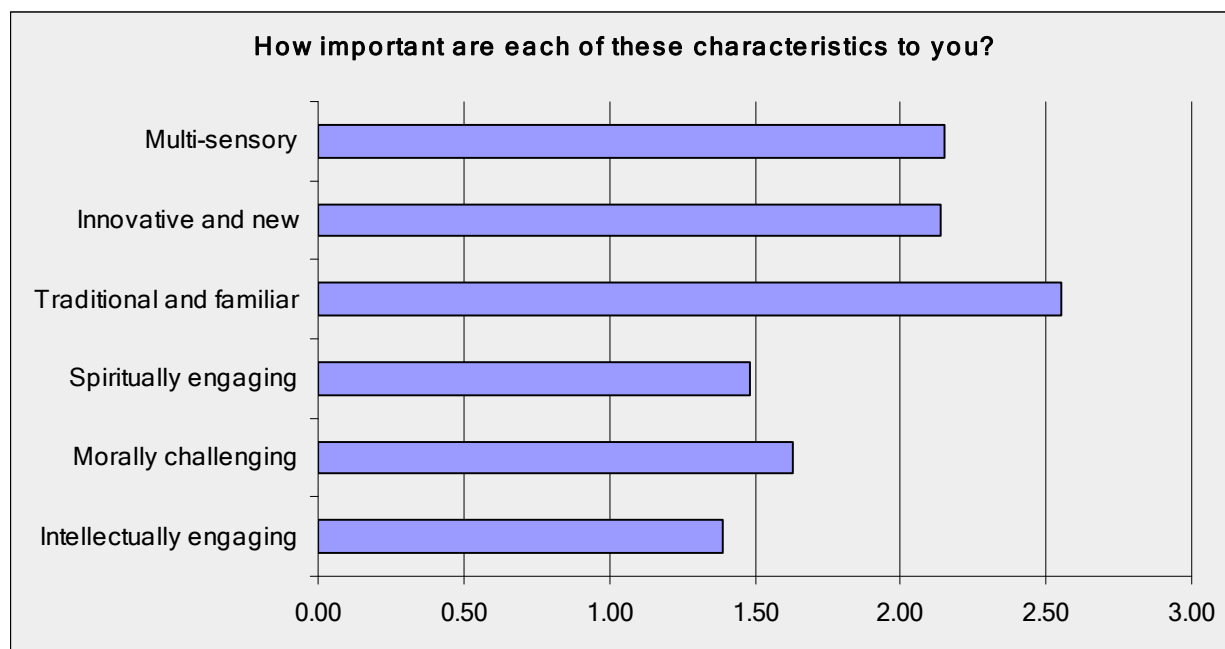
## **WORSHIP**

*“Personally, I just like being in a well done worship that has a spiritual connection. I don't want to think during worship, I want to FEEL.”*

Worship is at the heart of the Unitarian Universalist experience, and the exploration of worship elicited very strong feelings. First, participants were asked how important a set of activities were to meaningful worship.



Second, they were asked to rate the importance of various characteristics of a worship services.



Finally, they were invited to respond to open-ended prompts about music, ritual, sermons, preaching, and general reflections on their worship experiences and needs. While there is certainly a diversity of responses, clear trends emerged.

Overwhelmingly, young adults are looking for worship that is morally challenging, intellectually interesting and emotionally moving. This is, of course, a tall order, but my sense is they are less interested in perfection than in real engagement. There is less hunger for worship as performance than worship as an invitation into a collective conversation. Their responses held a generous spirit of exploration. “I would also add diverse worship styles,” wrote one young adult; “lots of people have lots of different enjoyment of various types of worship, let's have a regular rotating schedule of different kinds of worship so they all get a little of what they love and get to participate in what other people love.”

Worship needs to be interactive. Clearly there is no common definition of what this might mean. One person's stand-up-and-share activity is another person's worst nightmare. Still, there are a few central notions worth exploring. Churches should find opportunities for

congregants to deepen their engagement with the service's message through on-line spaces, discussion groups, or a simple meal after worship. "Sermons and readings may help with a theme to spark discussion," noted one young adult, "but I probably process sermons better if I read them and reflect. Not having grown up with sermons very often, my attention tends to wander." Another remarked that, "conversation is important because it allows for worshippers to feel involved, important, and to have a voice." The young adult respondents expressed hope for a worship model that felt less like a Starbucks interaction – with clearly drawn lines between the served and the serving – and more like a salon where their engagement could fluctuate depending on the topic and their spiritual needs.

Respondents spoke of a hunger for morally challenging worship, inviting discomfort from time to time. "I love it when my brain goes \*click!\* and I know how to better live my life from that day forward," wrote one person. "An inspirational message/theme spurring those listening on to be better people," wrote another. While no one I spoke with seeks to be spiritually abused, there emerged a clear sense that Unitarian Universalists may be *too* affirming in their worship, too careful in their exhortations. Young adults desire worship that, in the words of one young adult, "challenges me to consider new ideas spiritually or theologically."

Music and singing are essential elements of meaningful worship for young adults. Done right music can deepen the theological message and provide another entry point for engagement. Many of the respondents complained about a lack of accessible music. As one participant described, "Too often the songs chosen from the hymnal are boring and only used because they are thematically relevant to the topic of the service and you can feel the lack of energy in most of the people. Songs should be simple, deep, and preferably more of the melodic 'chanting' variety." Many young people were equally concerned about worship only using contemporary, secular music. Instead there is an interest in a blending of genres and generations.

While a few responses made a trade-off between intellectually and spiritually engaging worship, most refused this distinction. Young adults seek what one person described as “sermons that challenge me intellectually AND spiritually.” In general, the young adults interviewed felt the intellectual side of their worship experience was well tended and it is the spiritually moving practices – chanting, prayer, meditation, silence, movement, emotion and stories were mentioned most frequently – that are lacking. One young adult wished that services could be “worshipful, spirit filled, and not just intellectual exploration.” “Spiritually engaging is most important, and while that often overlaps with intellect and morality, finding practices that specifically engage the spirit is crucial,” wrote another. This should not be misread as a rejection of traditional worship practices or even of more traditional liturgical language. “I love it when a service is traditional enough to feel comfortable, but contemporary enough to feel relevant,” observed one respondent. Finding the balance is key.

## CONCLUSION: So What?

*“I’m a Unitarian Universalist who believes in the power of love beyond anything else.”*

Like any demographic group within a denomination, young adults are no monolith. The responses from the surveys and interviews of preferences, practices, and needs cover broad territory theologically, liturgically, and practically. Yet even within this diversity of ideas, clear trends emerge: the central importance of fellowship; a fierce sense of independence matched by a hunger for exploration, connection, and openness; the importance of nature as a spiritually-centering modality; and an embodied commitment to social justice expressed collectively.

Young adults seek worship that is spiritual moving and not just intellectually engaging; they long for individual growth and exploration within the bounds of a caring and committed community. A ministry model for young adults would include a purposeful small group ministry program, organized in groups of 6 – 10 that rotate twice a year, led by trained lay leaders. It would include weekly worship that had traditional liturgical elements – song, sermon, quiet

reflecting and joyful sharing – expressed in ways that would vary over time. There would be a strong on-line presence to connect members and invite new people in. It would be a community purposefully engaging with young adults but open to all.

Of course there is an assumption here: that what young adults want is different from what older adults want. I suspect in some cases this is true. But I also suspect this is largely, though not entirely, around the margins. That many of these needs are expressed with equal passions by many Unitarian Universalists regardless of their age. This being so, those discrepancies, even marginal ones, make a critical difference in the participation rates of young people. And the participation rates of young adults made a critical difference in the life of our churches. While not always consistent, the messages are clear: young adult Unitarian Universalists want a church home that is boldly engaged in the world, welcoming of diverse ideas and people, and deeply committed to being in community with one another.

At its core, Unitarian Universalism is about the journey rather than a destination. There is professed neither dogma nor creed, but a shared commitment to journey together through the complexities and difficulties and joys that accompany all human lives. In my research I encountered a significant number of young adults who not only feel they have no spiritual community, but are desperately looking for one. For Unitarian Universalism the congregation is the unit of denominational life, the center of a spiritual community. Young adult Unitarian Universalists who are disconnected from a church are disconnected from the central practice of their faith.

Participation in spiritual community matters for young adult Unitarian Universalists. It also matters for our churches. It matters, not just because young people who leave the church often don't come back, but because churches are one of the few multi-generational spaces that exist for many of us. It is not just that our young adults miss out on the opportunity to be part of a congregation, but our congregations miss out on the opportunity to be part of the lives of

young people. Our churches suffer the loss of an entire piece of the generational continuum.  
We cannot be whole without them.

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