

UCSJ Focus Group Narrative Report

10 focus groups, May 31-June 24, 2017

82 - Participants

5 - Nonparticipants emailed extensive comments

For I know the plans I have for you. Plans to give you hope and a future. Jeremiah 29:11

In preparation for planning for the next church year and to assist in the search for both our interim and permanent pastor, the church council decided to hold a series of focus groups to get input from the congregation. The focus groups were designed to address several key issues and collect consistent data from all groups. Members of the council and pastor search team were encouraged to attend as many focus groups as possible to hear the discussions. Participants completed a worksheet during the focus group and provided additional comments.

- Mission Statement - Please rank these from 1-4 based on what we're doing best and growth areas.
 - We are a loving and compassionate church family that respects the dignity of each individual. (161)
 - We seek to foster deeper relationships with God and each other through worship, fellowship, growth, and service. (193)
 - We find our joy and meaning through faith in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. (222)
 - We seek to promote Christian unity and to encourage understanding and cooperation with those from different traditions. (245)

Methodology: 1-4 points were assigned to each statement. Lower numbers indicate higher achievement of the goal.

- Activities - Check the five activities that you enjoy the most.
 - A strong majority enjoy our Sunday worship
 - Choir, hymns, preaching, fellowship
 - Highly valued activities
 - Cantata, men's breakfast, newsletter, newslink, small group education
 - Most like the variety and quantity of activities

Methodology: These are qualitative rather than quantitative responses based on discussion and worksheet input.

- Our Congregation - Check all that you believe correctly describe our congregation.
 - Most visitors feel welcome when they come to our church. (69)
 - We openly accept all people wherever they are on their spiritual journey. (68)
 - It's easy to get involved in our church. (63)
 - We are growing in our Christian faith. (56)
 - We experience God's presence, joy, inspiration, and awe in worship services. (56)
 - Our church has a traditional, conventional service. (56)
 - Our church is a priority in the lives of our members. (48)
 - Most members and friends attend services weekly and are involved in many of our programs and activities. (45)
 - We have a strong sense of belonging and say that most of their closest friends attend the same congregation. (44)
 - We volunteer in our community with social services, educational, and advocacy activities. (41)
 - Our congregation is inspired to see and do things to act on our faith. (37)

- We care for new people including follow-up. (30)
- Our congregation values contemporary worship, practices, and beliefs. (17)
- We have children, youth, and young families in our services and involved in our programs. (6)

Methodology: Each item was assigned one point if selected. Higher numbers indicate more people selected this.

- Our Vision: Prioritize (1, 2, or 3) these long-range goals or focus areas for our church. Indicate which ones you'd be willing to give your time and talent to support.
 - Mission oriented - 125 (33 time/talent)
 - Community center - 146 (19 time/talent)
 - Center for families - 153 (17 time/talent)

Methodology: Each response counted as 1, 2, or 3 points. Lower numbers indicate higher priority. Participants were asked to identify the statements they would give their time and talent to achieve. The numbers in parentheses indicates the number who said they'd support this effort.

- Pastoral Leadership style - choose 2 (most preferred to least)
 - Relational leadership - 53
 - Inspiring leadership - 50
 - Servant leadership - 24
 - Transformational leadership - 23
 - Organizational/administrative leadership - 17

Methodology: Each item was assigned one point if selected. Higher numbers indicate more people selected this.

- Pastoral Duties - Participants were asked to select the two most important in each category.
 - Worship Leadership and Preaching
 - Provides interesting, thought-provoking, and heartfelt sermons (71)
 - Considers music an important part of a worship service (29)
 - Oversees the spiritual needs of the congregation (20)
 - Respects the traditions of the Christian Church and the four denominations (13)
 - Has a passion for ecumenical ministry (10)
 - Embraces outside-the-box theology and spirituality (10)
 - Leads worship in an informal but respectful manner (5)
 - Works closely with the Worship and Music Team (4)
 - Ministry to Families and Individuals
 - Provides pastoral care to congregation and friends (52)
 - Creates relationships with the congregation (46)
 - Provides support during personal crises (18)
 - Provides pastoral counseling to members or referral as needed (17)
 - Assists in the coordination of family and youth ministry (11)
 - Performs hospital or shut-in visits, including home communion (10)
 - Follows up with visitors (5)
 - Conducts baptisms, weddings, and funerals (3)
 - Leadership to the Church
 - Works closely with church council, ministry chairs, and volunteers (49)
 - Provides organizational direction and administrative oversight (46)

- Leads an ongoing process of visioning and prioritization (33)
- Leads and participates in study groups (14)
- Provides encouragement of regular visitors to join the church (12)
- Maintains regular office hours (5)
- Provides leadership development of church members (3)
- Community Involvement and Outreach
 - Resides in and joins in the broader community (66)
 - Encouraged to attend social functions organized by our congregation (40)
 - Is seen and known in our community (29)
 - Interfaces with other area pastors (20)
 - Attend community events (4)

Methodology: Each item was assigned one point if selected. Higher numbers indicate more people selected this.

Addendum to Focus Group Results

Comments made during and after Focus Group sessions by participants

(Comments from different individuals are separated by an *. Comment content overlaps the topic headers. An effort was made to include every comment written either on focus group forms during a meeting, or emailed later to the focus group facilitator. Some comments have been edited for ease of reading or to maintain anonymity)

SECTION II - OUR MISSION STATEMENT

- a. *We are a loving and compassionate church family that respects the dignity of each individual.*
 - b. *We find our joy and meaning through faith in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit.*
 - c. *We seek to promote Christian unity and to encourage understanding and cooperation with those from different traditions.*
 - d. *We seek to foster deeper relationships with God and each other through worship, fellowship, growth, and service.*
- * We might engage people who are seeking a spiritual path by offering insight into various religions - and comparing them to Christianity
 - * People who are used to direct “creed” type vocabulary do not see us as being “rooted and grounded in Christ”
 - * Generally, extremely liberal Christians tend to feel comfortable at UCSJ, but “conservative Christians” can even think we’re not Christian (like RCC not wanting UCSJ to participate in Church in the Park). We need to ask ourselves why they don’t even think we are Christian and HOW can we bridge that divide.
 - * I feel we do a good job valuing others’ opinions and beliefs
 - * Why don’t we say creeds? Why not sometimes incorporate that? Look for more opportunities for service.
 - * Seldom use creed(s)
 - * Solution for singles wanting to participate in events that are couple-driven
 - * Say every Sunday (“We find our joy and meaning through faith in God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit”)
 - * A deeper relationship with God fosters the involvement in worship, fellowship, growth, and service. This relationship is like the pebble thrown in the lake.
 - * Doing a good job and can always do more

- * I am a traditionalist as far as my faith is grounded in the Bible. I have trouble with those who do not believe the Bible is the Word of God!
- * This shows on a weekly basis as a strong family
- * Wish this reflected illustrations in today's world
- * We prefer the traditional hymns/worship
- * We need to encompass in our church what is going on with persecution of Christians globally
- * Not sure this has a plan for success (c. above)
- * We are all very different
- * Like traditional service think we organized this church with this idea
- * Seems we are very close to each other
- * Lots of love and caring in our church
- * Church doesn't provide growth in faith
- * Define "different tradition"
- * God the FATHER
- * Difficult to differentiate, all seem to mesh together - feel like we do a good job in all 4 (parts of mission statement)
- * I see (a.) as being who we are; (c.) and (d.) as what we do, and (b.) as the result we would like to achieve.
- * I think all are important and interconnected. The mission statement is our goal - what we want our church to be, not necessarily where we are at right now.
- * What we aspire to be
- * "Forgiveness" should be a part of this statement somewhere
- * (b.) Should be our first priority; agree with "Father" vs "God" in this statement
- * UCSJ does well
- * Different traditions need to include non-Christian traditions - or even spiritual-but-not-religious
- * (b.) This is a personal effort that may not be a "church" responsibility
- * Not to influence others with our own opinions - visibly promoting Christian unity draws others the most to God
- * Service is more important
- * I believe that kindness and love should be our focus. I know, based on comments today, that some members of our church have felt criticized at times. Kindness must be missing!
- * I think oftentimes growth comes from examining traditions to see if they are serving as keeping a body in the same place as "stuck"
- * I hope we remain mainstream Christian, and not too much emphasis on non-Christian faiths as we seek to include others.
- * (a.) Very important. If we respect and value then we may be able to lead them to Christ.
- * We mostly find joy and meaning in the historical Jesus, not in God or Jesus the Christ or the Holy Spirit
- * All of us are at such a low point in our relationship with God that there is huge potential for growth in everyone.
- * Don't need the church to foster this meaning (b.)
- * (b.) This is difficult because of different theologies that exist - some much more "fundamental" than others. This may mean different things to different people.

SECTION III - OUR MINISTRY PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

- * Continue creating fellowship activities that help people to know each other
- * Add women's breakfast monthly
- * Need women's breakfast or lunch
- * Wonderful choir director

- * I've been guilty of not being involved in ministry even though I'm on the committee. I might have done more in that area if church leaders grabbed me and expressed a need for my help.
- * Are we doing too much social stuff and not enough growth stuff?
- * Grief, singles - could this attract new younger members?
- * Are we unintentionally excluding some people because some activities are too couple-oriented? Do some activities seem cliquish? How to address this?
- * It is good not to confuse busyness with effectiveness. Busyness is not of itself bad, but it can burn us out. Our relationship with Jesus is what can really inspire and empower us.
- * I'm a female who is GLAD there is a men's-only breakfast. I feel it meets a need, and if someone wants a female-only breakfast, they can do it themselves without invading a "safe" space for men only.
- * I like the busyness of the church. I think it offers a variety of ways to be involved and shows a vital commitment.
- * I would like to go to Taize more often. And I notice that I choose lots of activities that involve food!
- * Being able to be of help to someone on a one-to-one basis and not as part of a "woman's group" thing
- * All activities are good!!! Don't stop any of them!
- * Always feel (Sunday Worship) so special - sermons are usually wonderful - lucky to have so many pastors in our UCSJ
- * UTE Indian Mission was discussed but never followed up
- * We need to be intentional about engaging summer-only attendees. Plan and develop an effective system to do this. A "welcome to summer" party/dinner in June? Summer calendar and activities need to be planned and ready for this thru Labor Day.
- * Men's breakfast should be open to women more often!
- * Invite women to men's breakfast more often
- * Getting more people involved here (CARE Ministry) would support connections, service, initiate spiritual growth
- * We might be trying to do too much, losing focus on the most important.
- * Don't burn out the volunteers!
- * Add and delete programs - we can become too lean
- * Is it possible to do a limited counseling program aimed at young families?
- * There can be a problem if we try to do too many activities
- * For certain, we can spread ourselves too thin. Concentrating on a few things may be advisable!
- * There is much ministry, service, etc. with the church and then far-away, such as UMCOR, HAVEN HOUSE, etc. What about community close-wise?
- * I never get to see any of the men's breakfast programs, not being a man. Why are all the women's programs basically exploring our "feelings," and the men get to be informed and enlightened?
- * Wonderful job. The church provides such a wide variety of activities. Every activity supports the mission statement.
- * All of these need emphasis and participation for church growth and development and unity
- * We need to find a way to grow youth participation
- * Don't confuse activity with meaningful fellowship
- * Too many activities
- * This is one (Wednesday night studies) where one can really grow in understanding and faith

SECTION IV - OUR CONGREGATION

- * Contemporary worship attracts younger people

- * We value good meaningful sermons. We need to attract youth.
- * We do fellowship well!
- * If you are 20 years old or a young family, there is no one for you to fellowship with and relate to, so the fellowship art does not exist in our church for them.
- * Desire more traditional services and interaction with other churches in the area
- * Churches that are growing more in the U.S. typically include elements of contemporary worship. This attracts younger people and young families.
- * Do we specifically invite newcomers? It's the same people every time.
- * Would like some more up-to-date hymns
- * Hymns seem to me to be often selected to go with sermon title so not always ones that we like
- * I would like to see more variety in music styles. Worship music is something I have had "over the board" experience with, from very traditional music (as it seems we have here) to contemporary, repetitious singing. I see value in each.
- * We have a diversity of education opportunities from bible study to spirituality
- * Conversation groups within our congregation to promote deeper relationships in our existing congregation - perhaps that's the first thing
- * Continue to promote our openness as a congregation
- * Invite people to come who may not necessarily call themselves Christians
- * We could follow up with people we haven't seen for a while
- * I enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of the gatherings
- * Have no more than 3 verses of hymns to sing and have up-beat not slow music
- * Emphasize benefits of church membership and participation to young people
- * Maybe you should look at this (It's easy to get involved in our church)
- * I do prefer our traditional hymns
- * I would say progressive message while keeping traditional order of service
- * Think the rage between progressive and traditional members is a source of joy and energy!
- * I don't think that contemporary church music has to be overly loud and entertainment oriented. I think some of the traditional hymns feel stodgy and the words are stilted and require theology training to understand (not attractive to younger generation)
- * Would like to add contemporary aspects in music, worship, not dirge hymns!
- * Strong personalities of church members are a positive. Now to get them to "play together."
- * Looking for a summer church in the area. Liked the concept of PLUM
- * Basic traditionalism of Sunday service
- * Liked the minister, Dick Engdahl, the choir, the people who greeted us and who we met
- * Prayer chain for medical needs or our church members and families
- * Follow-up visits for potential new members needed
- * Openness to accept all people on their spiritual journey
- * Follow-up very important - preferably by the pastor
- * Care for new people after the service and visit at home
- * Willingness to be open to mindset of others that do not believe as we do personally
- * Worship is a matter of the heart not the style of worship - too much the same each week; would like some music that is more lively but God-centered still with varieties of style - more contemporary
- * Like the idea of a "welcome" person to greet after the service
- * Offering activities that meet the needs of people in the community who want a deep spiritual conversation but do not attend the traditional service
- * We are an open and evolving Christian church. We encourage spiritual exploration.
- * A very likeable and friendly congregation
- * We do many of these things well but can improve in all of them
- * I would love to offer ESL classes here

- * We have Sunday School teachers willing to teach our children, but not many young families attend regularly.
- * Why does our music have to be all one or the other? Why can't we have a blend of traditional and contemporary, or praise music if it is beautifully done?

SECTION V - OUR VISION

- * Younger adults needed to run this center activities
- * Outreach in community - we go out and interface with people in community as ambassadors of UCSJ
- * Focus on community outreach and volunteer projects
- * Sanctuary should not be used too often for too many outside groups - too much wear and tear on our beautiful place
- * Children usually won't come unless parents do
- * Our vision should not be to become a mega church. Some growth might be good but bigger is not better.
- * While we should not delete the youth vision - we need to understand and accept who is primarily attracted to UCSJ
- * I have heard that there are parents on Log Hill who are stressed as they need to come pick up kids after school and then take them back for other activities. Perhaps a "stop gap" place for these kids would introduce them and their families to our congregation and help build relationships.
- * Yes, we need the classroom space and I will give my time and money to this
- * Second service - we are shooting arrows but it makes sense to have a bullseye to aim our energy towards. You cannot attain goals you have not set.
- * We need Sunday school for adults and children
- * Two services - target different audiences
- * Variety of worship experiences
- * Variety - valuing of different ways or worship - music, poetry, silence, meditation, prayer, etc.
- * A variety in worship services that includes all different spiritual flavors. More modern, progressive topics, songs and themes. Music - from good classical church music (Bach, etc.) to Native American, Buddhist, Sufi, peace and environmental inspiring songs, chants, and dances of peace.
- * Inclusivity of different ways to experience God - deepening the service - expanding to include different understandings of "spiritual"
- * Take your passion into the community and offer your help, support, gifts, as a citizen first. Secondarily as a member of the congregation.
- * Encouraging church members to get into community involvement to show love of God in practical ways - application of God's character to meet human need
- * Like the idea of variety within worship to reach broader base of styles/preferences.
- * We keep putting emphasis on more building space - I don't think we are being very futuristic with churches closing
- * Yes, it would be wonderful if we had families and all ages in regular attendance and activities for all - but if the demographics of the community does not support it let's just go with what we have

SECTION VI - OUR NEXT PASTOR

- * Spiritual leader - a pastor who wants to bring in new people
- * We need a pastor parish relationship committee. This needs to be developed and structured now! To be prepared for the new pastor. These same three committee members - some from

council but maybe not all three. Would do all the salary, contract negotiation with pastor, performance reviews, expectations and duties. They are the bridge to the church's "pastor" employee, then council meetings are about ministries and church, not pastor.

- * A high energy individual
- * Sermon apply Bible to everyday life
- * We need to commit to 3-5 years not a one-year contract with a pastor. This gives them security and lets them know we are committed to them.
- * Spiritual leadership - conducts spiritual and meaningful services with exceptional sermons.
- * It will be difficult to find a pastor with all of these leadership traits - so they need to be prioritized
- * Good speaker with depth of delivery
- * Open to new ideas; related scripture to everyday life
- * Takes charge
- * Intellect
- * Need a strong pastor and staff to improve the Care Ministry
- * A great preacher would fill the church every week but they may not be a compassionate minister. The speed of the leader is the speed of the team!
- * We'll have trouble finding a pastor to lead us if we don't know where we're going. Our facility limits where we're going and who we can accommodate.
- * Pastor needs to prioritize based on current need - can't expect all from one person
- * A pastor who is open hearted and minded - a warm and inspiring individual who is warm and humble at the same time (not an ego centered person)
- * I would like a minister committed to a traditional service
- * Considering the diversity of beliefs and ideas of our congregation, we should strive to get a main stream Protestant who would be capable of providing the kind of sermons and leadership that would inspire everybody, yet at the same time would offend nobody.
- * A qualification for a new pastor at UCSJ might be for him or her to have intergenerational interests. That is that he or she would be skilled in connecting people across generations in activities and projects. In this way, the new pastor would not need to be specifically a youth oriented pastor as that might eventually cause the older generation to drift away.

The following comments were sent to the facilitator in response to the focus groups, and incorporate thoughts on various, and sometimes all or more, of the sections above:

***Comments 1**

I would like to add that I would love it if our new Pastor would be steeped in the Faith traditions that go beyond Christianity to the Goddess (2-4000 years before Christ), Celtic, Sufi, Buddhist and Muslim traditions. Helping all of us explore what is the most important part of our lives. To show and be loved instead of just preaching about it in conventional terms and inspire others to do that too is such a gift.

I love the theology of Mathew Fox, Richard Rohr, and Eckhart Tolle. Sue Monk Kidd lays it out so well in her wonderful autobiography: *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter: A Woman's Journey from Christian Tradition to the Sacred Feminine*.

As to the music choices:

I would love to include more old sacred music from Gregorian Chants, to Meditative music, as well as Songs by Hildegard von Bingen, to Bach, Mozart, and other sacred Composers from our past, spanning all the way to songs by the Beatles (Let it be..., Imagine,) or American Indian songs to sacred Chants and Dances of Universal Peace that encompasses all faith traditions from around the world.

The Hymns and Anthems that are done in our church do not inspire me but I do understand that other people love them.

*Comments 2

There were a couple of points I wanted to make last night that I will add to the mix now. Thanks to the reading I have done at UCSJ, I am most interested in a pastor and a liturgy that would embrace a more contemplative approach. This would include an acknowledgement of Jesus as an historical person who embodied the mystery of Incarnation, the marriage of spirit and matter, the enfleshment of the Divine. But instead of seeing Jesus as someone to admire, I am most touched and aligned with the sense that we are invited to follow in his footsteps, to not just believe in theological premises but to put on the mind of Christ, to acquire his consciousness.

A contemplative approach brings us into the moment, it invites the heart - not just the head - into our service, into our language, into our relationships. Someone who is our leader must express a genuine love and presence that we can feel. As Dick said last night, we can 'read' that energy. This is true spiritual maturity.

I would love to see our church community become even more inclusive - welcoming all those who are seeking spiritual support and community - not just Christians. That includes Buddhists, agnostics, sufis, earth-based spiritual practitioners (native american, celtic christianity), etc. these are the folks who also have the children that we are trying to attract.

*Comments 3

Although of interest to me, I fully realize that UCSJ is (and should be) representative of not only our four affiliated denominations but also, the diverse backgrounds and theological interpretations of all of our members and attendees. Nevertheless, any input given will tend (like mine) to be individually subjective. All have an equal right to be represented.

My first comment is: Exactly what and who does UCSJ represent? How broad do we want to be? Are we genuinely inclusive or do certain beliefs held by a significant percentage, preclude looking "outside of the box?"

The next comment refers to how we see the growth of the church: With an aging, set-in-their-ways congregation, should we support this large segment entirely (with the understanding that they are past their prime years and likely to leave/die or cease to attend for family reasons) or should we be not thinking of ourselves but of the next generation and the countless others who some will describe (somewhat mean-spiritedly) as "the unchurched." In my experience, most of the latter tend to be more "Christian-like" than many who attend church regularly! Indeed, I could personally provide at least 16 names of people who have "tried us out" but not returned because of feelings of us "not being in touch with the modern world." For instance: The vast majority of forward-looking churches that appear to be growing all have screens and projectors that are used as part of the services. This church has repeatedly ruled out such measures. In addition, many people look towards positivity and spirituality as more important than tradition or liturgy.

Should we be looking at younger people and families? If so, these groups tend to be either further to the right or further to the left. Can we accommodate both or should there be a direction which leans towards the needs and openness of left-leaning people who tend to steer away from traditional belief systems which they see as judgmental, exclusive and non-accommodating? In Ridgway there is already a more right-leaning church. Do we want to compete or provide a viable alternative?

To find the ideal pastor will surely be a very difficult task. Some may be happy and others not. Some will not care. However, It seems to me that the three key ingredients are:

1. Seeking out a person who really wants to move here and immerse his/herself in our local community with primary focus on being the fulltime pastor of this church.
2. Finding someone who can satisfy ALL of the church body without compromising their own integrity and beliefs. Flexibility and openness are the keys. Of course, this person will no doubt have to comply with our affiliated denominations' manifestos but could this person still be acceptable while appealing to those who would attend if our "program" was less rigid?
3. Getting a person who has considerable prior experience in pastoring a church of this size or bigger.

Christianity today is not always, but increasingly adapting, to keep up with modern trends. Some denominations are realizing that churches do need to change - without necessarily giving up ALL of the old traditions but become cognizant of 21st century thinking and pertinent imaging. The message of Jesus remains perennial in its wisdom and example, but criticism of new ways of thinking is damaging and turns many good people away.

From a more practical viewpoint, we continue to up the budget by surmising that our congregation will increase. Failing to make this happen, UCSJ will cease to exist. Indeed, attrition alone demands significant new blood. We all need to surrender our personal egos and some of our long-held beliefs to submit to the common goal; and that should be: Finding an enthusiastic person who can communicate well with young and old, right, center and left and love to be here as a fully integrated, outdoor type of person who has the ability to inspire from the pulpit, not turn half of the congregation off and be totally approachable in a Pastoral role. This is not easy but the right person is out there. In the end, we should all ask ourselves the question: "If Jesus was walking among us now, right here, in Ridgway, what would be His advice?" Would He be "modern" and openly proclaim his message of forgiveness, inclusivity, acceptance, and love or would He be harkening back to the OT and messages of superiority, righteousness, and judgment. Would He be more evangelic or open-armed in welcome to what Ridgway has become in terms of its more liberal constituents? Would He think that we need to look towards the future and its new ways of thinking or cling on to the past?

*Comments 4

When joining a church, you shouldn't have to leave your brain at the door. "Who we are" should include belief in reason, science, and biblical scholarship as well as Jesus' message of love, compassion, social justice, and equality for all.

We should acknowledge that faith eventually involves "surrender to mystery." Our "religion" should not be thought of as something that we indoctrinate people with, but rather something that opens people up to something they already have.

Our acceptance of Jesus and his message should help save us from our selfish egos so we can further God's creation, but not from something that is going to send everyone else to eternal damnation if they don't do the same.

We should accept that the Bible is not a "history" book but, rather, a collection of many types of literature written, selected, and translated many times by many people (mostly men) who all had agendas - therefore it cannot be taken literally.

The church, in particular UCSJ, needs to see itself as "evolving" - in the spirit of the United Church of Christ phrase that "God is still speaking!" It should be aware that society has a radically different "world view" than just a few hundred years ago (the earth is not the center of things; bad spirits don't cause disease; the printing press and now the internet give people a much-expanded way to communicate and think for themselves; many scriptural "facts" have been debunked by scholarship and new discoveries; evolution is a fact and we know the earth is a lot older than 6000 years; etc., etc.). This has a lot to do with changing church demographics. Young people with questioning minds are rejecting the traditional church but still embracing spirituality and basic Christian values. To broaden our appeal (many of the so called turned off "young" people are now middle age) we should brand ourselves as an "open and evolving 21st century church." In the same spirit, we should continue to acknowledge the "spiritual exploration" that already takes place within our church community.

With any emphasis on personal growth we need not forget that "Social Justice" was at the heart of Jesus message.

*Comments 5

We have been grateful for a church that has not demanded much of us, to be honest. In recent times, we have felt that welcome strained, because we haven't been helping much...understandable, but we are what we are. We try not to be a drain. Sermons, etc. to motivate us and I bet others like us, have the opposite effect.

We love the Taizé service and want to help more with that. It is the church service model we relate to the most at this time.

We think it is obvious that any new pastor should have their spouse living in the Ridgway area.

The pastor needs to be understanding and tolerant of progressive beliefs as well as other faiths, but a practicing Christian. This is the trickiest part, I think. I'm not going to try to explain what I mean by that here.

And we hope there will still be room for spiritual refugees and wanderers like us.

*Comments 6

I share many other church members' opinions that our future pastor must be sensitive to the diverse theologies and attitudes toward Christianity that comprise our congregation. That is no small challenge. I think he/she should combine deep faith with an open-minded, exploratory approach to Christian teachings and willingness to draw upon other religions and philosophies that emphasize love, compassion, and inclusivity over dogma.

Of course, the ideal pastor should meet the obvious requirements, such as biblical scholarship, experience in leading diverse congregations and excellent writing and communication skills. Additionally, I think that person should commit to remaining here for at least five years and immerse him/herself in the community, even beyond the pastoral role. I would like to see our pastor volunteer for community causes and join nonprofit organizations.

Our church leader must be outgoing and proactive about providing support for every member of the congregation when needed. That person should be willing to form friendships with everyone, from longtime council members to occasional church-goers.

Sermons should wake and shake us up and show how we can reflect Christ's love in everyday life.

And I would name still another essential quality that not many people mention as an important trait for a pastor: a sense of humor. I don't mean I want a stand-up comic; rather a pastor with the ability to put our existential crises, both personal and universal, into perspective with dry and kind-hearted wit. Healing laughter can bridge almost any divide.

That is a characteristic that is hard to measure in a candidate but I think the search team will know it when they see it.

*Comments 7

Doing Well - excellent job of keeping members (especially summer residents) informed all year of what is happening in our church (and making us feel truly welcome even if we are only present part of the year).

UCSJ Unique - because of its multi denominational structure, it makes people of differing church backgrounds feel welcome and part of a more enriching experience.

Like to Become - move involved in service projects benefiting the local communities - the "hands and feet" of Jesus.

New Pastor - strong in own faith, mature in sermons, open to differing interpretations of the Bible; upbeat, warm, gregarious personality.

*Comments 8

...One of my big issues is the concern about the "out of the box" or "progressive" or "liberal" beliefs and interpretations of our Christian theology and how should we at UCSJ be receptive to them. We need to use common terminology that does not confuse the issue with political terminology. I suggest that we use "traditional" and "non-traditional" to generally describe these differing theological beliefs.

Secondly, we think "embrace" is too strong a word to describe what we, as a congregation, or our Pastor, should be doing with respect to these non-traditional beliefs. I am recommending that we use "acknowledge and respect" when describing our feelings about the non-traditional theological beliefs.

I personally do not see any problem with supporting and embracing using the church for events like "Spirit Fest" because, as far as I know, it does not contradict our traditional Christian theological beliefs.

*Comments 9

To give you just a bit of feedback with regard to the selection of a new minister: We are very liberal, yet there are people who study the history of Christianity who would say we are orthodox. I know that there are a significant number of people who would appreciate hearing more about the Christ in all of us, as opposed to praising Jesus frequently throughout a given service. Our belief is that we are all perfectly human, while at the same time entirely spiritual. Relevancy is very important to us. We tend to lean toward a belief that very little of scripture should be taken literally. Some claim, for example, that originally, when the host was served, that the clergy person would say "You are the body of the Christ," as opposed to "The body of Christ." We believe it is limiting (even in a Christian church) to making the word "Christ" the only path to the spirit (I also see the "Great Spirit," "The Buddha," and so on as meaning the same thing.) Christ was a Jew. We would love to hear some of the beliefs and the culture of the Jewish peoples. We believe that you can beat people over that with the over use of "God" and "Jesus."

*Comments 10

1. Men's Breakfast - I would have dearly loved to attend the most recent Men's Breakfast. I would have been fascinated to hear about Henry Jackson, and Thomas Moran being together on one survey trip. But I did not even attempt to be allowed into the most recent Men's Breakfast, because of the very negative reaction I received a while ago from the men (one in particular) who run the men's breakfast group. I even offered to not eat breakfast and just sit quietly in the back and listen, and I was still given a resounding No!! It still bothers me!

Don't get me wrong, I think the Men's Breakfast is a wonderful way for men to get together and socialize, while at the same time learn something new, and the group should definitely continue. And I really, really like the Tuesday morning ladies' book studies. What a wonderful way to get to know individual women better and develop some Christian friendships. But I and many of the women who end up living in Ouray County are more mature and multi-dimensional and interested in a variety of topics. So, I think the men's breakfast should be opened up to allow women to attend at least 4 talks, preferably 6 talks per year. One to two talks where women are invited is just not enough. I also don't think the combined breakfasts would become over-run with women. It would just be nice to have more opportunities for women to occasionally listen to topics of interest.

2. I would certainly love to have a multi-generational church, with teens and younger families in attendance! But I don't know if that is feasible for UCSJ here in Ouray County. I really liked your study of the number of kids 18 and under, versus the number of people over 65 who now live in Ouray County. I did not realize that, and I have lived here for almost 24 years. The community continues to change for sure. But how many of those kids are not already involved with a family unit at another church? Maybe our church could eventually reach out to our local community and even Western Colorado as a whole to help kids with a number of issues. And I think UCSJ should continue to be involved with Young Life here in Ouray County.

*Comments 11

I found it very disappointing that we are once again talking about the vision for the church. Council has a session each year. What has happened to all of that? Who has followed through all these years? What makes us feel anyone will follow through this time? It is so disheartening to think we are no further ahead in the process and, once again, have to ask, "What is our Vision?"

My main goal here is to make note of things that I feel are critical as we search for a new pastor. I was disappointed that almost no time was allowed to have what I call the "difficult conversation." There are issues that need to be addressed and there is a part to play by every member of the congregation. To that end, here goes:

1. As I mentioned, we have not kept a pastor for more than two years. Candidates, if they are paying attention, are going to ask why we cannot keep a pastor for more than two years. As a congregation, we have to ask the same question.
2. I do not think it is healthy for our church to have three, now two, husband and wife teams on the council. A change in the bylaws needs to happen to be sure we are never here again. I fully understand that it was difficult to find folks willing to volunteer and here we are. Perhaps allowing non-members who are here year-round could be possible. Anything to expand the pool so we do not do this again.
3. From the absolute “get-go” a candidate needs to understand that we are four main line denominations but, within that, we have a chasm between our traditional and non-traditional believers. He or she must be able to thread that needle without abandoning his/her own core beliefs. This is a challenging task but one that must be taken on and, in fairness to the candidate, he/she must know that right away and decide if they feel they can navigate it.
4. I would guess that many in the church would feel that a new pastor has to perform every one of those duties listed on the focus sheets. This is impossible and we, as a congregation, must be realistic about what the pastor can/should do and who is going to pick up the slack on the other duties. What are our priorities? We are an aging congregation and many, myself included, no longer have the energy to do what we used to do. Given that, what is realistic? It is not that the pastor will do it all. If we expect that then he/she is doomed to fail as well. The pastor and the congregation need to be a team with boundaries and expectations well lined out.
5. We need to invest in and encourage our pastor. It will never be perfect but grace and love need to be our guide. There have always been those in the congregation that are outspoken, critical, and can probably never be satisfied. That mindset can make life miserable for a pastor and does a tremendous disservice to the majority of the congregation that now finds itself without a pastor yet again. It is the Council’s job to not fall victim to the tyranny of a few.
6. Lastly, I am in hopes that the focus group summary session will allow time for those attending to speak their feelings. Along the lines of a Town Hall. We are on base and strike three is staring us in the face. We cannot make the same mistakes again.

*Comments 12

There is one thing that as the church God calls us to do, and that is to show His Love as the primary motivation for all our decisions and actions. That being said there will be many opinions of what that should look like. I believe that if we are going to truly show God’s love it will be through service and reaching out to the community, not in serving ourselves, the church members. Yes, we need to love each other and support each other but if we look inward and spend our energies to primarily entertain and fellowship with each other, UCSJ will wither. The programs, activities, social events, worship services, and educational opportunities must be for the purpose of showing God’s love to those in our community. If the choices we make for the style of worship, kind of music, studies we do, events we host are all just what we personally are comfortable with and ‘like’ we are going to miss out on reaching the community. I do NOT believe we should compromise on speaking the truth of God’s word or on the message of WHO Jesus is and what He has done for our salvation and that without Him our ability to relate to God is greatly reduced, however; the way the message is expressed needs to offer a variety of worship styles and be open to less traditional formats, songs, prayers, and music. To truly reflect God’s love UCSJ needs to be a place that reaches out to and is open for community meetings and other ways to let the community see the church members as a loving family beyond its closed membership. The church, as described in the New Testament, accepted all that were searching and wanted to learn but were careful not to lose the truth of God’s love through Jesus. Giving grace for the differences in each other without expecting them to change for our preferences and beliefs is a good start. I think we can trust the Spirit of God to work in hearts that are truly seeking the truth.

AS far as the type of person UCSJ needs as a pastor - he or she should be hired to be a preacher and spiritual leader. The church body needs to choose leaders, i.e. deacons, that meet some of its own needs so the pastor can concentrate on the primary tasks. It is unrealistic to expect the pastor to be at all church events, be active in lots of community organizations, do visitations, meet their own families' needs, have time to prepare awe inspiring and creative sermons, and take care of the administrative and strategic leadership of the church. As I have never been a member of one of the mainline denominations that support UCSJ, I have no allegiance to any of them. I would prefer we be seen as a church body that has members of many denominations but not tied to any of them, if it were possible.