



## Congregational Survey Results

December, 2016

This report provides a summary of the responses to our congregational survey conducted during July, 2016. The survey was conducted as part of the ministerial search process to provide guidance to the USR Search Committee, as well as provide a current profile of “who we are” to prospective ministers. All current Unitarian Society of Ridgewood members and friends were invited to participate. The questions on the survey were designed to provide an opportunity for members and friends to express what they desire in a new minister as well their current beliefs, what they value at USR, and a profile of their involvement and demographics. The survey was conducted online and hard copy versions of the questionnaire were available for those who preferred. Our survey results reflect approximately 60% of the members so should be taken as representative but not a completely accurate picture of the congregation and should not be interpreted as a definitive description of who we are.

## Why we attend USR

The most important reasons we attend USR are because of the sense of community and fellowship we find here, the intellectual stimulation, celebrating our common values and the minister.

Top 5 Reasons we attend USR	% of Respondents who said Very Important and Important
Community	95%
Fellowship	94%
Intellectual Stimulation	93%
Celebrating Common Values	91%
Minister	88%

## Reasons for Attending Sunday Services

The two primary reasons we come to Sunday services for the intellectual stimulation and to celebrate our common values. After that is a close cluster of reasons: the sense of belonging we feel, the music and the meditation. Note this question asked respondents to choose their top 3 reasons.

Reasons in Rank Order	% of Respondents who rated this important
Intellectual stimulation	73%
Celebration of common values	51%
Sense of belonging	40%
Hearing, playing or singing music	34%
Personal reflection and meditation	34%
Support and encouragement of social action	31%
Uplifting personal experience	29%
Fellowship period after services	27%
Mystical, spiritual experience	7%

## Our Likes and Dislikes as Elements of Sunday Services

What we most like in Sunday services are the sermons/addresses and the music followed, not surprisingly, by coffee hour! We like readings but not responsive readings. We like meditation but not necessarily prayer.

Sunday Service Element	% Who Say Essential/Very Important	% Who Say Not Important
Sermons	94%	0%
Special Music	82	1
Coffee Hour	81	0
Readings	67	3
Child Dedications	59	5
Chalice Lightings	52	12
Announcements	50	10
Hymns	49	12
Meditation	47	8
Lay Participation	47	5
Celebrating Religious Holidays	41	9
Time for All Ages	36	12
Choir	22	18
Responsive Readings	21	20
Prayer	17	40

## Sermon/Address Topics We Really Like

We didn't find evidence of any topics we particularly disliked, however we are less interested in those related to a specific tradition (although many of us like celebrating religious holidays). Perhaps it is more a matter of how the topic is presented. We tend to like sermons/addresses that deal with the following topics:

- Social justice,
- Coping with life's challenges,
- Philosophical ideas,
- Personal and spiritual growth.

## Ranking the goals of Sunday Services

The respondents ranked the goals of Sunday services in this order:

Goal	% who say Essential/Very Important
Build community	90%
Help us understand ourselves better	88
Promote a supportive environment for developing and sharing Individual feelings and beliefs	82
Inform us on important social justice topics	80
Spur individuals to action	73
Show new paths for individual growth and change	75
Inspire reverence and awe	46

## USR Strengths We Would Like Ministerial Candidates to Know

Over half of our members and friends in this survey took the time to write out what they thought any ministerial candidate should know about USR. Many focused on the sense of community, intellectual sophistication of the congregation, richness of the diversity of beliefs, history of strong lay leadership, commitment to social action. Typical of the comments are these:

- *Strong lay leadership*
- *A welcoming congregation*
- *Intelligent, committed members who are willing to work for the Unitarian Society and also for social justice projects.*
- *Intellectually stimulating and creative. Also, relatively warm and welcoming compared to other UU congregations/fellowships attended in the past. Very active and engaging.*
- *Pastoral care, Volunteerism, Community, acceptance of difference*
- *1. Mainly humanist outlook 2. Strong lay leadership 3. Many areas to volunteer and groups to belong to to strengthen interpersonal relationships for all ages*
- *Tenacity*
- *Warmth. Openness.*
- *Social Justice Initiatives (Reproductive & Racial Justice)*
- *Very strong lay leadership. (I want a minister who will embrace our lay leadership; not be threatened by it.) Strong social action. A group of smart & caring people.*

## Prioritizing the Roles a Minister Can Play

The congregation rated the importance of various roles a minister might play at USB and we prefer a minister to play the roles of spiritual and intellectual leader.

Role	% Ranked in Top 2	% Ranked in Bottom 2
Spiritual Leader: Prepares and leads worship and celebrations	55%	9%
Intellectual Leader: Challenges and stimulates the thinking of the congregation	53	4
Person of Character: Models the ethical life	29	33
Social Activist: Promotes ethical values in the larger community	21	26
Pastor: Counsels, visits the sick, visits people at home, etc	14	26
Facilitator: Involves people in congregational life	13	29
Administrator: Achieves results by coordinating and supporting the efforts of others	4	61

## Priorities of the Minister

Responsibility for a successful congregation is shared among the minister, other staff, and lay leadership. In terms of personal capabilities and time and attention, we ranked the top five (5) priorities for the Society's next minister as follows:

Priority for Minister	% who chose as a top 3 priority
Presenting stimulating and challenging Sunday services	88%
Fostering a sense of fellowship and community within the congregation	72
Caring for and counseling individuals	36
Encouraging congregational social justice programs	30
Creating a sense of awe and wonder in Sunday services	20

## Most Important Skills and Functions for a Minister

We also asked about the relative importance of specific functions for a minister and here is how we answered:

### **Essential Skills**

Deliver meaningful Sunday addresses  
Community building within the congregation  
Maintains positive staff relations

### **Very Important**

Provide an excellent Sunday service experience  
Provides spiritual guidance  
Provides personal counseling  
Be an advocate for child/youth religious education  
Encourage and participate in social action  
Keeps abreast of scholarly religious studies and issues

### **Somewhat Important**

Be involved in interfaith outreach and communication  
Help with leadership development in the congregation  
Promote membership growth  
Provide adult RE classes  
Support music and the arts within the congregation

### **Least Important**

Be active in denominational affairs  
Administration of the society (pledge drive, finance)  
Get involved in committee work

## Top 5 Personal Qualities for a New Minister

Everyone was asked to choose the top three choices of personal qualities from a list of 10 qualities. The five most often chosen to be in the top three were:

- Character (integrity, stability and reliability)
- Professional Competence (ability to communicate, counsel, empower)
- Intellectual Depth and Rigor
- Empathy (genuine interest in and concern about others)
- Scholarship (educated, informed, interesting)

## Descriptions of the Ideal Minister

Of course no one can match everyone's ideal, yet it can be informative to see what the ideal might look like. Typical of some of the descriptions given for the ideal minister are:

- *Of course I want everything. Humanist, intellectual, imaginative, sensor of humor, good to work with is a good start*
- *We need a good preacher to bring new people to the congregation and retain them*
- *Well-educated, creative out-of-the-box thinking, passionate and enthusiastic about ideas while at the same time able to respectfully contemplate other opinions, compassion and attentiveness to the members of the congregation, accessibility*
- *Experienced, mature, strong interpersonal skills, ready to work with our strong lay leadership. Smart -- our congregation consists of many intelligent people. Someone I would feel comfortable going to if there were problems in my life*
- *A minister who has a strong personal practice (whatever that may be) and is centered so they can deal with the often intellectually needy as well as egos. Someone who can bring the 2 sides of USR together, that is the spiritual group and the social actions group. Someone that can unite us, creativity, compassion sense of humor, intuitive and emotionally intelligent.*



## I'm Glad This Minister Is With Us Because:

We asked you what would make you say you were glad the new minister was with us and here are some representative responses:

- *If only the minister would bring tears of joy to my eyes and the recognition once again that this community has real significance in my life, day to day and week to week. I have been experiencing a sense of loss lately and I sorely want my sense of congregational family and meaning back.*
- *The minister should conduct Sunday services in such a way that I would be proud to recommend people come to our congregation.*
- *Give sermons that show depth of thinking and wisdom and challenge us to see the world and life in its complexity.*
- *Challenging us. Offending some of us. Having fun. Being joyful. Being honest.*
- *Give an inspiring or thought provoking or challenging address. Guide and provide solace to the membership in times of crisis, upheaval or tragedy. Take an unexpected or unpopular stand on an issue.*
- *Make us laugh.*
- *A minister who spends time getting to know the congregants in addition to giving inspirational worship services.*
- *Have some warmth and make me feel like they are actually happy to see me and be involved in USR life.*
- *Inspire, motivate and unify congregants*
- *Support social justice programs*

## Worst Mistake our New Minister Could Make

In response to this question there were three main areas in which a new minister could falter. These are:

**Not being a good listener** (including acting before understanding the views of the congregants and not respecting the diversity in the congregation)

**Not being engaged** (being aloof, uninterested in connecting to congregants, not being sincere in interactions)

**Not being ethical** (being dishonest, prioritizing a personal agenda, violating a confidence and our trust)

## Goals for the next 5 years

There were two dominant answers that came from this question:

**Continue to be a force for social justice** - Many noted particular issues such as racial justice, gun violence, poverty and advocated more engagement within the congregation and greater outreach in the community and specifically with the interfaith community.

**Focus on strengthening our community** - We expressed a desire to increase stewardship and a focus on financial stability, growing our membership and a desire for more fellowship, Adult RE and intergenerational activities.

## Our Concerns and Fears

We asked an open-ended question about concerns and fears regarding the future of the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood. Perhaps reflective of the environment of 2016, many of us answered with our concerns about our country and society. In addition to our constant concerns about volunteers and parking, the concerns and fears about USR can be grouped into three categories:

### **Concerns about growth**

Many say we need and want to grow and recognize the challenges that presents to our finances and facilities. Some fear that growth will result in a loss of that sense of community that is cherished. Some are concerned about outgrowing our facility. Some fear that we will not grow enough.

### **Concerns about current religious openness and direction**

Some are concerned that we are not open to people who believe in any form of God or find Christian values or traditions to be important in their lives. Some fear that USR may become too religious, and not remain a comfortable place for atheistic or agnostic humanists.

### **Concerns about finding our next minister**

Some are concerned that we find an inspiring minister to help address our other concerns.

## Our Religious Beliefs

People were asked to respond to a large number of statements that reflected ideas about religion and beliefs. Not surprisingly, we believe many different things.

Belief	Believes Pct	Neutral Pct	Disagree Pct
My spiritual life is grounded in a sense of the fullness and connectedness of all things	77%	19%	4%
"Goodness" and "meaning" are human constructs created as a result of the human encounter with each other and the world	73%	21%	6%
My spiritual life is lived in response to the sacred circle of being and the effort to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature	60%	25%	15%
The powers traditionally attributed to a supernatural deity are inherent in the natural world, which is the focus of my respect and devotion	59%	27%	14%
The concept of god is a human illusion that has caused vast suffering throughout human history	57%	23%	19%
It may be that God exists, but it is a waste of human energy to argue over the existence of God when there are so many more important demands upon our time and resources	50%	23%	27%
Family rituals and traditions are a central element in my religious and spiritual life	49%	23%	28%
I do not know whether or not God exists, but I am willing to explore the possibility	44%	18%	38%
It is beyond the capacity of human beings to know whether there is a God	44%	34%	22%
I am inspired by the traditions of indigenous peoples and find in their rituals and practices a deepened sense of the sacred and interconnected quality of life	32%	39%	29%
The world reveals the presence of an intelligent designer, but personal knowledge of a relationship with that reality is not a possibility	13%	39%	48%
A personal relationship with God is a vital part of my spiritual life and a necessary part of my worship experience	11%	13%	76%
The life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth are central to my understanding of God, the Universe, and the human condition	10%	20%	70%

## A Profile of Survey Participants

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### **Status**

93% are Members 7% are Friends

### **Sunday Service**

45% mention attending the 3 or more times per month with 28% coming 1-2 times

### **Participation**

Almost all say they have attended a USR event other than Sunday services and contributed to a USR social action cause in the past year. Over half report having worked on a committee.

### **Length of Affiliation with USR**

Less than 1 year	0.7%
1 - 2 years	2.0%
3 - 5 years	9.5%
6 - 10 years	20.4%
11 - 15 years	17.0%
16 - 20 years	15.0%
21 years or more	35.4%

### **Length of Affiliation as a Unitarian Universalist**

0 - 2 years	4.8%
3 - 5 years	5.5%
6 - 10 years	21.4%
11 - 15 years	13.8%
More than 15 years	54.5%

## Gender

63% Female; 37% Male

## Sexual Orientation

Asexual 2%; Bisexual 1.5%; Gay/Lesbian 1.5%; Heterosexual 90%;  
Prefer Not to Answer 5%

## Age

18 or under	0.0%
19 - 29	0.7%
30 - 39	2.1%
40 - 49	10.3%
50 - 59	28.8%
60 - 69	25.3%
70 - 79	19.9%
80 or older	13.0%

## Marital Status

Married 75%; Divorced 10%; Widowed 6%; Single 6%;  
Living with a partner 2%

## Ethnicity

White 93%; Asian 1%; Hispanic 2%; Prefer Not to Say 6%

## Education

Some college 5%; College Degree 33%; Masters Degree 47%;  
PhD, M.D., J.D. 15%

## Household Income

\$75,000 or less 24%; \$75,001 to \$150,000 25%;  
over \$150,000 50%



