

A Commentary on The UU Church of Tampa Survey March 2021

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As many of you know, I have been asked to participate in the assessment and planning activities being carried out by what has come to be called the Healing and Moving Forward Program Planning Group. I am honored that UUCT leaders see fit to invite me to be a resource as you work to restore the church community to a place where it can once again thrive as a beacon of liberal religion to the greater Tampa region. Having let it slip that I have considerable experience in the realm of teaching and using statistics in one of my earlier careers, I was assigned the task of providing a commentary on the statistical results of the March 2021 survey conducted by the group. So, here goes ...

I hope you have taken some time to examine the survey results. If not, I recommend doing so. Some questions you may have about the congregation are clearly answered. For example, does everyone know about the disruptive person policy? Clearly, no. Other questions may lie outside the scope of the survey. For example, do former members and current members agree on their views of how respectful people at UUCT are toward one another? This would require a cross tabulation of the distribution of responses from current members against that of former members. There are simply not enough responses from former members to provide useful statistics here. What the overall survey does provide is a rough guide to areas of concern and some ideas about what kinds of workshops and themes will benefit the UUCT community.

There were some 62 respondents from the population of more than 100 who were invited to participate in the survey. The response rate was quite respectable. Of course, not all respondents answered every question, so the numbers of responses to individual questions vary. The published results are shown as percentages. This means that small percentages can be misleading. For example, a percentage of 1.7% or so represents one response, and 3.3% or so represents two responses. But even small percentages can be enlightening because they prove that Unitarian Universalists never completely agree on anything!

In many studies of attitudes, including this one, it is common to rely on what are called Likert scales. Respondents select from a range of responses to express their degree of agreement, or disagreement, with a given statement. This range of responses comprises a Likert scale. These kinds of scales are ordinarily reliable and are thus widely used in survey research. One caveat, however, is the need to be careful interpreting the inevitable, neutral middle response. Does that response represent neutrality, or no opinion, about the statement? Or might it represent some kind of ambivalence, a position of trying to express both some agreement and some disagreement at the same time? The bottom line is that Likert scaling is very useful, but not without some careful interpretation.

Along the same line, especially when sample sizes are small as they are here, we may be tempted to combine adjacent categories of response in order to reach a sensible conclusion. This can be effective, but caution is appropriate. Let's take a look at Question 16: The statement is

“Most people at UUCT share a common definition of what constitutes racist behavior.” We are tempted to combine the “Somewhat Agree (33.3%)” and the “Agree (26.7%)” responses and conclude that a strong majority ($33.3\% + 26.7\% = 60.00\%$) agree on what constitutes racism. And so one might conclude that this is not a problem area worthy of attention.

On the other hand, we could combine all responses except the “Agree” category ($11.7\% + 11.7\% + 16.7\% + 33.3\% = 73.4\%$) and conclude that nearly three out of four respondents say that there is less than full agreement on what racist behavior is, and thus this represents an area of concern, something that clearly calls for attention in the UUCT community. I suspect we might generally agree that this latter interpretation is the one we should focus on, but don’t forget that unanimity is not something you find in any UU community.

Another issue in interpreting results is whether or not those results can be generalized. The technical term for generalizability is known as criterion related validity. In other words, can we draw valid conclusions about the population of current and former members of the UUCT community from these survey results? Only about three former members responded to the survey, so it should be obvious that generalizing the opinions of all former members based on this survey would be very questionable. But what about the opinions of current members? We would be on somewhat firmer ground here, but the results we have include former members as well as friends of the congregation. The numbers we see are based on all of these groups together, so making some generalization about members only is risky at best.

Together, these comments may sound like we cannot say much at all about the survey results. But this is not true. We can begin to identify general areas of concern by grouping questions together by theme and loosely comparing distributions of results. For example, it is probably clear that questions 3 through 10 relate to church polity, or governance. We can say that there is certainly less than full agreement that church governance works well. Is there broad agreement that governance is badly in need of improvement? Definitely not. But what we might tentatively conclude is that there could be better communication between the governing board and general members of the UUCT community.

So, what does a perceived need for better communication imply? This result, along with other groups of questions and responses, and suggestions made by respondents to the survey, suggests the need for various kinds of workshops and UUCT member sessions that seek to improve internal communication within the congregation.

Dr. Cyd Charrow has been working on this very task. She has been advising the Healing and Moving Forward Program Planning Group for some time now. Survey results in hand, she has very carefully studied your collective thoughts and responses, and she has developed some excellent suggestions for programs and workshops that should go a long way toward healing much of the conflict that has troubled UUCT for several years. Statistical results from an exploratory survey such as this one cannot provide a crystal-clear picture of what has gone wrong and exactly how to repair the damage. However, it can—and has--- provided some broad guidance as to what next steps are apt to pay dividends. I sincerely hope that you will commit to participating in the program sessions that come out of these efforts. I believe they will go a long way toward a healthy redirecting of the trajectory of UUCT in the months and years ahead.