

**Report of the Congregational Identity Task Force  
of the Ministerial Transition Team  
April 2022**

**Rob Dainow, Leslie Hill, Marg Fletcher,  
Naomi Taylor, and John Boyle**

# Becoming

by Mary Grigolia

We are who we are becoming

We are all we have been

We are what we are dreaming

We have only just begun

## **Table of Contents**

### **Volume 1: Report**

	<b><u>Page</u></b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Community</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Principles and Shared Values</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4. Minister</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5. Services and Ceremonies</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>6. Personal and Spiritual Growth</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>7. Walking the Talk</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>8. How We Contribute</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>9. Other Perspectives</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>10. Conclusions</b>	<b>25</b>

### **Volume 2: Appendices**

- A. Methodology**
- B. Questionnaire Theme Summary Analyses**
- C. Analysis of ROI Workshop Results**

# *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*



## Summary

The Congregational Identity Team (CIT) was formed in February 2021 to lead the Vancouver Unitarians through a process of rethinking our identity in preparation for finding and welcoming a new, settled minister. Rethinking our identity is one of the five developmental tasks that a congregation in interim ministry must accomplish for its successor settled ministry to be effective.

The CIT gathered information primarily in response to thought-provoking questions using an Appreciative Inquiry approach. A mail-in questionnaire and Rethinking Our Identity Workshops were the main ways we used to engage members with the questions over eight months in 2021. We also included relevant data for four other sources. In analyzing the information we received, we identified six overarching themes – Community, Principles and Shared Values, Minister, Services and Ceremonies, Personal and Spiritual Growth, and Walking the Talk. None of these stands alone and, together, they make up the interdependent web of the Vancouver Unitarians. We also identified the many ways people contribute to our congregation and some occasional, critical comments.

Overall, we found deep appreciation for all dimensions of our congregational life. While there is always work to do to strengthen and build our community, there is great optimism for our future.

Vancouver Unitarians feel that they have found a home in the UCV community. They cherish the people, the quality of relationships, and the respectful and positive interactions within and beyond the congregation. Many express a desire to increase our ethnic and economic diversity, and to attract more families and younger members.

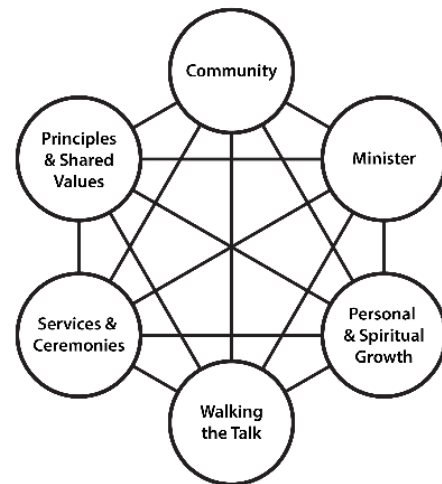
Our principles and shared values drew many members to Unitarianism and UCV. They are the bedrock of the congregation, inspiring our personal and spiritual growth and stimulating our outreach and activism in the broader community.

Vancouver Unitarians of all ages appreciate the personal and spiritual growth they find in our principles and shared values, the Sunday services, and the opportunities for learning and action that come with participation in our community.

The minister is central to our UCV life, often directly responsible for people choosing to join our community. Their services and thought-provoking homilies shape the worship experiences that support our personal and spiritual growth. Members deeply value the minister's ability to lead, challenge, inspire and show compassion, and to model living our principles and shared values.

The elements of our services and ceremonies - setting, rituals, homilies and music - bring people into UCV and help sustain them here as they deepen their connections to all aspects of UCV life.

The personal and spiritual growth in our lives is closely tied to the activities we choose to engage in. A strong majority of Vancouver Unitarians told us that our social activism, how we walk the



THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB  
OF THE  
VANCOUVER UNITARIANS

## ***Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report***

talk based on our principles and shared values, is the most important characteristic of our community.

Members contribute to our community life through a wide range of activities, skills, personalities, and perspectives. Many respondents mentioned engagement through activity, both within and beyond our congregation, as the healthiest, most life-giving characteristic of our community.

Vancouver Unitarians also reminded us that we cannot rest on our laurels. While we have much to appreciate and celebrate, we still have work to do – in welcoming and including new members in our community, in ensuring minority voices are truly heard, and in how we represent ourselves to each other and the broader community.

Finally, we did not find any “surprises” in our identity investigations. There is a broad consensus about our defining characteristics, views which are very much in keeping with who we have been since our pioneering members started this congregation in 1909. This finding points to our great strength – we have a strong and clear sense of our identity which has stood the test of time.

# *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*



## 1. Introduction

This report is the result of the work of the Congregational Identity Team (CIT), formed by the Ministerial Transition Team in February 2021. The mandate of the CIT was to lead UCV through the process of rethinking our identity in preparation for finding and welcoming a new, settled minister. Rethinking our sense of purpose, identity, and direction – Who are we and where are we going? – is vital to helping us clarify our unique strengths, needs, and challenges, and thus what we want from a settled minister. It is also vital to informing potential new ministers about us. Rethinking our identity is one of the five developmental tasks that a congregation in interim ministry must accomplish for its successor settled ministry to be effective.

### Methodology

The CIT used an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach which focuses on moments of strong pride and performance and uses these to create a future that nurtures and supports even more pride and performance. We asked UCV congregants nine “thought-provoking questions” (TPQs) about their best experiences and memories at UCV (see table below). The approximately 120 responses to these TPQs were the basis for the bulk of our analysis.

As well, we used all the communications channels we were aware of to invite Vancouver Unitarians to participate in this Rethinking Our Identity (ROI) phase of our ministerial transition. The ROI Workshops were the principal method to bring congregants together to reflect on and share their responses to the TPQs, to identify important themes in their discussions, and to create aspirational “possibility statements”. Ninety-six congregants (including 11 youth) participated in 18 workshops between March 3 and October 13, 2021.

We then sent an invitation directly to every member who had not participated in an ROI Workshop, asking them to complete and return the ROI questionnaire. Thirty-three of more than 200 members returned these. Four members chose to send us their own thoughts on our identity in an email submission. We also included in our analysis relevant data that two other members collected in 2022.

We identified 22 main themes in responses to the first seven TPQs, then combined them into six overarching themes. Finally, we reconfigured these into the eight topic sections for this report after considering our non-TPQ data.

The CIT methodology is described in more detail in Appendix A.

### Reporting our results

The six overarching themes identified in our analysis were: **Community, Principles and Shared Values, Minister, Services and Ceremonies, Personal and Spiritual Growth, and Walking the Talk**. While we recognized these major themes, we also found there are strong linkages and dependencies among them. None stand alone. Thus, they might usefully be thought of as six “lenses” through which to view and understand the character of our UCV community. Together, they make up the interdependent web of the Vancouver Unitarians, and

## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

each has its own section of our report. In each case, linkages to other themes are indicated in **bold type**.

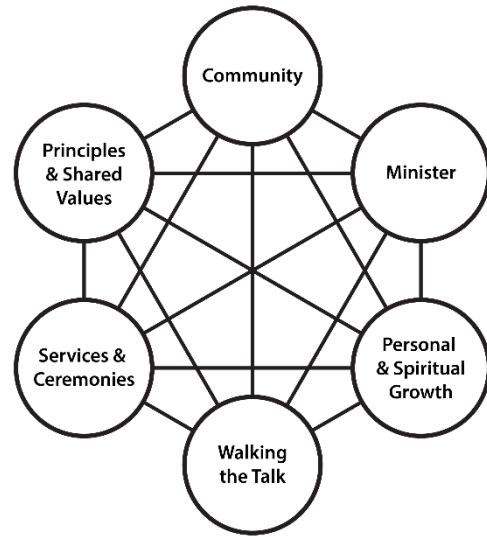
TPQ6 asked about the most valuable ways people contribute to our congregation. These are summarised in the section on **How We Contribute** to UCV life.

Finally, we took an Appreciative Inquiry approach to our investigations which mostly generated positive, affirmative responses. There were, however, occasional critical comments which were evidently important to the respondents; they are included in our report in the **Other Perspectives** section.

These eight sections make up our report, followed by our overall conclusions.

In reading the report, note that:

- Direct quotes from respondents are *italicized*; and
- The nine thought-provoking questions are referred to as TPQ1, TPQ2 and so on. They are listed in the table below. The TPQs particularly relevant to each report section are reproduced there for ease of reference.



THE INTERDEPENDENT WEB  
OF THE  
VANCOUVER UNITARIANS

## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

### **Thought-Provoking Questions**

**TPQ1:** Reflecting on your entire experience at UCV, remember a time when you felt most engaged, alive and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?

**TPQ2:** What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships among people at UCV? What would you say has been most valuable about your friendships in this community? Have certain groups been valuable to you? What would you say is most important about how we relate to each other? Give some examples of how we live together at our best.

**TPQ3:** What are the most valuable aspects of our congregation's worship? In your Sunday services and other worship experiences at UCV, what contributes the most to making your worship alive and meaningful? When worship is at its best, how does it shape us? What shapes your Unitarian faith?

**TPQ4:** What do you believe are the most important and meaningful elements of our congregation's engagement with the local community, the nation, and the world? Describe one or more times when UCV was most faithful to Unitarian values and principles in how we relate to, work in, and act as witness in our community.

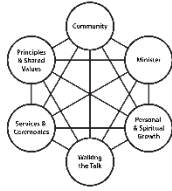
**TPQ5:** What are the most important things our Unitarian community has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference?

**TPQ6:** What are the most valuable ways you contribute to our congregation – your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities?

**TPQ7:** What do you think is the most important, life-giving characteristic of our UCV congregation? When we are at our best? What is the single most important value or characteristic that makes Unitarians or UCV unique?

**TPQ8:** Make three wishes for the future of our Vancouver Unitarian congregation.

**TPQ9:** Is there anything else you would like to add?



## 2. Community

Vancouver Unitarians expressed their appreciation for our community at almost every opportunity – in responses to almost all the TPQs as well as in ROI workshop possibility statements.

Of the 116 responses to TPQ7, 65 (56%) stated it is the community, the people, that is the most important, life-giving characteristic of our UCV congregation.

*We create this congregation together: it is not given from above.*

*A healthy community inspires within us engagement, celebration, respect and fun.*

Some distinctions within this theme of community are described below.

### Belonging, finding a home

*One day stands out for me. I was participating in a compassionate communication circle before a Sunday Service and felt a strong sense of connection with others in the group. Afterward, I walked out into our courtyard where people were arriving and felt that same deep connection with others, a joy in my heart at seeing them that brought on tears of happiness.*

Nearly half of the those who answered TPQ5 referred to UCV as a community they valued, a source of friends and connection, a home that mattered and / or a safe welcoming space. Others mentioned how important it was to their families and particularly their children. For one member it is a *haven from the pain and discord in the world*. Another shared that whenever she had a major transition or problem she always went back to the church for grounding and respite.

From a dad and husband: *Being there, having a place to go for me and my family - gives us all a sense of belonging, a club I want to be a member of.*

- **TPQ1:** Reflecting on your entire experience at UCV, remember a time when you felt most engaged, alive and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?
- **TPQ2:** What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships among people at UCV? What would you say has been most valuable about your friendships in this community? Have certain groups been valuable to you? What would you say is most important about how we relate to each other?
- **TPQ5:** What are the most important things our Unitarian community has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference?
- **TPQ6:** What are the most valuable ways you contribute to our congregation – your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities?
- **TPQ7:** What do you think is the most important, life-giving characteristic of our UCV congregation? When we are at our best? What is the single most important value or characteristic that makes Unitarians or UCV unique?
- **TPQ8:** Make three wishes for the future of our Vancouver Unitarian congregation.
- **TPQ9:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

### **Characteristics of our people and relationships**

Almost half of the respondents who answered TPQ2 described the qualities of the people and their relationships such as: kind and friendly, accepting, sincere, emotionally honest, thoughtful, intelligent, having diverse backgrounds and skills, and eager to connect.

*We have good and healthy relationships in our congregation.*

*The people seem to take on each other quite seriously, ... they are open-hearted.*

*We committed to this church in part because of the outstanding people we found here ... (including) great senior role models we admired.*

*A younger person stated that it's really hard to be mean here, everyone is wonderful.*

*And another member said it's like being at a really good party where everyone has something cool to say.*

A member explained that UCV has been everything to her. She found people who thought as she does, cared about where the world is going, reflected her own values and respected children.

There were also some people who acknowledged that they did not find it easy to make friends and establish relationships at UCV, especially at first. One respondent stated how welcoming a sense of belonging, camaraderie and friendship can be, especially if one has felt like a black sheep in other settings because of some aspect of who they are. A few mentioned that we don't always get this right but that we are working on it.

### **Connections through activity**

Nearly half of the respondents to TPQ2 mentioned engagement through activity as the healthiest aspect of relationships at UCV. *People are willing to get things done even if they have different opinions. There is a matrix of abilities, diverse skills and an openness to sharing.* Some of the dozens of specific activities mentioned were: the task force about what we call ourselves, messy church and potluck dinners, gardening, buildings and grounds work, picking strawberries together, learning and working together on teams like the environment, refugee, RE, lay chaplains, choir and many others. **Section 7: Walking the Talk** reports further on the value and meaning of the activities that engage Vancouver Unitarians.



### **Respectful communication**

Replies to TPQ2 indicated that many prize respect and non-judgmentalism, and an ROI possibility statement clarified where this can lead:

*People are respectful of one another and curious, but not judgmental.*

*A common feature of (our) groups is respect, our ideas are valued, and there is an attempt at good communication.*

*There is the freedom to be ourselves with our beliefs, not to be judged or put into boxes. I feel cared about and accepted.*

## ***Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report***

Possibility statement: *We integrate our Covenant of Healthy Relations in all aspects of our shared community so that we are a living, growing, and connected community of diverse individuals.*

In replying to TPQ6, some mentioned people or group skills such as deep listening, counselling, facilitation, and conflict management / peacemaking as things they offer our community. Several individuals mentioned personality characteristics they bring that include listening well, compassion, creativity, care, and humour.

Some additional comments about respectful communication were offered in responses to TPQ9. The Covenant of Healthy Relations was commended along with the plans to add practices like Convergent Facilitation, restorative practices and listening practice.

*It is important to see conflict not as a rupture but an opportunity for new information and a new perspective and discussion ... Disagreement is an opportunity to learn. Let's embrace healthy ways to transform it.*

*People in the congregation need to be heard, to feel that they have been heard. These go together.*

### **Desire for membership growth and increased diversity**

About a third of the wishes in response to TPQ8 were focused on membership. Many want increased ethnic and economic diversity, as well as an increase in younger members and families. Some generally mentioned increased growth in numbers and for the membership to be more open and welcoming.

*My hope is that our ministry will reflect the diversity of Vancouver.*

*The UCV community will only survive if we find a way to engage congregants meaningfully. To build diversity we need to offer appropriate programming. We would be wise to remove "church" from our name.*

*Even our limited diversity adds strength and vitality.*

One member, on the other hand, expressed the *hope that we will sustain ourselves at our present size (or perhaps a little larger) as an open, welcoming community.*

### **Summary**

Vancouver Unitarians cherish our community – our people, the quality of our relationships, the respectful way we interact with each other, and how we strengthen our connections through activities both within and beyond our congregation. The sense of “finding a home” at UCV is deeply felt. There is a general desire to increase both our ethnic and economic diversity, the number of younger members and families, and our general openness to all new members.



### 3. Principles and Shared Values

The importance of our principles and shared values was particularly evident in responses to survey questions TPQ1, TPQ4, TPQ7, and TPQ8. The emphasis was primarily on how they encourage and shape outreach and activism with the broader community.

In response to TPQ1, about one in four (23%) said that Unitarian values, and community outreach and environmental and social justice activism were what drew them into the congregation and inspired their most engaged moments. This awareness came in many ways, for example through New U sessions, listening to the **minister**, our **services and ceremonies**, and **walking the talk** – action and involvement with specific groups such as the Refugee and Wild Salmon Action teams. In each case, the trigger for their engagement was our Unitarian principles and shared values.

Similarly, in response to TPQ4, more than one in three (38%) respondents mentioned ideas and values which support outreach. Half of them noted that members bring to the world the individual and personal transformation they have found through Unitarianism, putting their beliefs, values, and principles into action – *walking the talk and where the rubber meets the road. We are an activist church.* In response to TPQ7, some members noted that we generally have a liberal religious and political orientation, and we are willing to take risks to support crucial issues. *UCV should never lose sight of that.*

Other respondents to TPQ4 focused on our work with other people and organizations in the broader community. *That's part of what makes us.*

It was also noted in the TPQ4 responses that we and our campus actively sponsor community meetings and activities such as all-candidates meetings during elections and fundraisers for First Nations initiatives. Our values support these kinds of activities – being non-judgemental, welcoming everyone, and having a sense of curiosity and openness.

- **TPQ1:** Reflecting on your entire experience at UCV, remember a time when you felt most engaged, alive, and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?
- **TPQ4:** What do you believe are the most important and meaningful elements of our congregation's engagement with the local community, the nation and the world? Describe one or more times when UCV was most faithful to Unitarian values and principles in how we relate to, work in, and act as witness in our community.
- **TPQ7:** What do you think is the most important, life-giving characteristic of our UCV congregation? When we are at our best? What is the single most important value or characteristic that makes Unitarians or UCV unique?
- **TPQ8:** Make three wishes for the future of our Vancouver Unitarian congregation.



## ***Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report***

About one in four respondents to TPQ7 spoke of our principles, our values, and opportunities for personal and spiritual growth among the most important characteristics that make UCV and Unitarianism special for them. Fifteen people spoke specifically about principles, nine about values, and eight about **spiritual exploration** and **personal growth**. At least three mentioned that it is also important to live our principles within our congregation when we engage in “internal debates” about some issue; they urged us to continue our respect for diversity and democracy as well as building community. An interesting observation from one member was that the use of many forms of art on our campus encourages us to embrace the wider world.

In response to TPQ8, several respondents desired greater UCV participation with the broader community (23%), and for more environmental, political, social justice involvement (14%).

Aspirational possibility statements from the ROI workshops also supported our active engagement with the world around us:

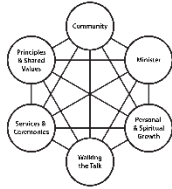
*We live our values through our actions; all contributions are valued.*

*Everyone is welcome here. Everyone belongs here, free from dogma and hierarchy.*

*We live our message and practise our principles.*

### **Summary**

Our principles and shared values are what drew many members to Unitarianism and UCV. They inspire and inform our **personal and spiritual growth** and lead us to engage positively with each other and with the broader community in outreach and activism. **Walking the talk** is an important characteristic of Vancouver Unitarians.



### 4. Minister

The importance of the minister was evident by how often it came up in most of our information sources: TPQ1, TPQ3, TPQ5, TPQ8, the ROI Workshop themes and possibility statements, and the email input. The minister contributes in important ways to **shared values**, **walking the talk**, and the Vancouver Unitarians **community**.

Almost one-third of respondents to TPQ1 mentioned the minister as a source of their most engaged, alive, and motivated times at UCV.

*[My most engaged, alive, and motivated times at UCV] would have been at services when Steven Epperson was minister. Sometimes his sermons, combined with the choir and the sanctuary, took worship to another level of beauty, connection, justice, and appreciation of life. This was especially evident at the end of a satisfying service when we held hands.*

*Listening to Steven Epperson's challenging homilies, I was inspired [and] usually left with a personal commitment to be better and more active in improving my life and my world.*

The minister is often directly responsible for people choosing to attend UCV.

*I found him [Steven Epperson] very inspiring and engaging and looked forward to attending UCV. It felt empowering. He spoke to issues that I had not heard mentioned from a pulpit and made me feel that I had found a welcoming place to be. Soon after this, I became a member of UCV.*

*Somewhat by chance, I dropped in one Sunday to the Unitarian church [and] was fascinated by Steven Epperson's sermon. To my surprise, I fell in love with the Sunday services.*

More than 50% of the people who responded to TPQ3 spoke about the importance of sermons and homilies in their faith and worship experiences. UCV has a long tradition of sharing the pulpit and inviting others to lead services and present sermons, but it is the UCV minister who presents most of the services and draws the larger attendance. While Steven Epperson's sermons were mentioned most often (he is not only the most recent and long-serving minister but also the only settled UCV minister that more than half of current congregants have known), Phillip Hewett and interim minister Lara Cowtan were also mentioned.

Further, at least seven people stated quite directly that sermons are at the centre of their worship. *For me the most valuable part of worship is a good sermon; The message in the sermons is critical to keeping me coming to services.* The most often-mentioned characteristics of sermons

- **TPQ1:** Reflecting on your entire experience at UCV, remember a time when you felt most engaged, alive and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?
- **TPQ3:** What are the most valuable aspects of our congregation's worship? In your Sunday services and other worship experiences at UCV, what contributes the most to making your worship alive and meaningful? When worship is at its best, how does it shape us? What shapes your Unitarian faith?
- **TPQ5:** What are the most important things our Unitarian community has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference?
- **TPQ8:** Make three wishes for the future of our Vancouver Unitarian congregation.

## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

were *stimulating and thought provoking*; some especially appreciated *thoughtful sermons that touch both intellect and heart*. Sermons provided inspiration, life lessons, what is important in life, challenges, insights into current issues, motivation to action or personal change. *Sometimes they just “hit a note”*. One person appreciated *thought provoking sermons that stimulate, integrate our principles into worship, and help shape our everyday life*.

Respondents to TPQ5 noted activities directly connected to the minister among the most important things our Unitarian community has contributed to their life. These included sermons (6 mentions), special services by a minister (4 mentions), and Sunday services (4 mentions).

Most of the ROI Workshops identified themes like those in the individual responses to the TPQs. One of these themes was the “importance of spirituality – spiritual home; strong minister important, with powerful, thought-provoking sermons”. These workshops also developed “Possibility Statements”. Some of these hoped-for futures at UCV were that:

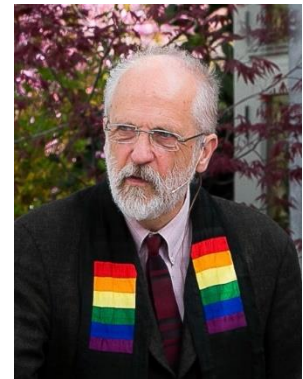
*Our minister leads, challenges, and inspires with compassion; and*  
*We cultivate ministerial leadership, actively supporting the development of new ministers by hosting ministerial interns and by supporting the education and training of UCV members seeking to enter the ministry.*

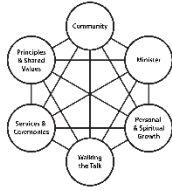
Thirty percent of the wishes for the future that respondents shared in TPQ8 were about the minister. Further, 18 respondents (15%) had specific wishes about the new settled minister we plan to call in June 2023.

*A really good next minister who is energetic, engaged and intellectual, and is an inspirational thought leader, and who is aligned with our values and what we aspire to as a community, and who is widely loved and respected.*

### **Summary**

Our minister is of central importance to all dimensions of UCV life. They are the source of the most engaged, alive and motivated times in many members’ lives, and are often directly responsible for people choosing to join and participate in our **community**. Their stimulating and thought-provoking homilies strongly shape the faith and worship experiences that support **personal and spiritual growth**, as do the varied **services and ceremonies** they create. Members deeply value a minister who leads, challenges, and inspires with compassion, who helps us integrate our **principles and shared values** into our everyday lives, and who **walks the talk** with us.





## 5. Services and Ceremonies

The importance of UCV's services and ceremonies showed up most clearly in the responses to TPQ1 and TPQ3.

Almost one-third of respondents mentioned services and worship in answer to TPQ1, referring to special services that ran the gamut from candlelight services to pagan rituals, pageants involving the children to ancestor services, personal ceremonies such as weddings and memorials to annual services like the water, flower and fire communions. Respondents also appreciated weekly rituals like candle-lighting, the meditation, and the singing of "Carry the Flame" at the end of the service.

Congregants who take part in services by giving a homily, joining the Worship Services Committee, taking part in skits or acting as Lay Chaplains said that work deepened their experience.

*I felt most engaged, alive, and motivated as a lay chaplain. It's a sacred and creative experience ...It's also a way to share the Unitarian faith with others.*

Fully 50% of respondents put music front and center of their answers to TPQ3. One third of these were current or former choir members. People mentioned the choir, congregational singing, guest musicians and the pianists, Elliott Dainow and Harold Brown.

*Music, it's huge because of what it does on so many levels; the singing, the choir, the music directors, the invited guests, all these experiences do what music does, at times transports people, brings them into sacred space, brings them together, a big part of the worship services.*

*Music, especially choir, opens [my] heart.*

Several people spoke about the importance of the Sanctuary space, its beauty, the sense of *peace and a real meditative space*, the views of trees and shrubs from the windows.

Many people have enjoyed the diversity of services, the inclusion of different faiths, lay and guest speakers.

*I like how we celebrate everything and I appreciate rituals that help me feel grounded.*

*I think it's really important we share our pulpit with people from outside of UCV who are doing important social justice work.*

- **TPQ1:** Reflecting on your entire experience at UCV, remember a time when you felt most engaged, alive and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?
- **TPQ3:** What are the most valuable aspects of our congregation's worship? In your Sunday services and other worship experiences at UCV, what contributes the most to making your worship alive and meaningful? When worship is at its best, how does it shape us? What shapes your Unitarian faith?



## ***Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report***

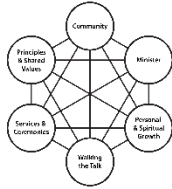
Many respondents value the way services are structured, the familiar pattern of elements and the presence of a theme binding them together.

*What's inside the structure can be mind-blowing.*

*Repeat central understandings over and over again [and] they become deeply known, deeply taken for granted parts of a religious culture. I think we could do more of this... to convey basic [Unitarian] understandings.*

### **Summary**

The elements of our services and ceremonies – the setting, the rituals, the homilies, and the music – bring people to UCV and sustain them here, strongly supported by the influences of our **minister** and our **principles and shared values**. On these foundations, we deepen our engagements in, and discover our contributions to, the various dimensions of our UCV **community**.



## 6. Personal and Spiritual Growth

The theme of personal and spiritual growth includes references to Religious Exploration (RE) for all ages. References to personal growth, spiritual growth and RE were found in replies to TPQ1, TPQ5 and TPQ9 as well as in ROI

possibility statements.

More than half of respondents to TPQ5 mentioned personal or spiritual growth. An over-arching observation was that they receive intellectual, social, and spiritual stimulation in a place that respects freedom of thought. One member noted that it was possible to be spiritual and practical at the same time, and to have non-dogmatic engagement with the world. Personal growth was mentioned at least twice as often as spiritual growth.

### Personal growth

For many, a key component of personal growth was learning and being guided by Unitarian **principles**. A parent stated that it was important for their family to gather with people who have similar **values and principles** but have different lived experiences. In various ways, several respondents stated that the **principles** and the **community** are guides on how to live and also inform their service work. One person said that *the values are large enough to affirm mine and flexible enough to attract people of diverse backgrounds*. Opportunities for personal growth and learning included:

- Discovering new ways of thinking;
- Moving away from judgment to acceptance of different points of view;
- Feeling safe enough to discover a new personal identity and to find love;
- *Think[ing] about how we speak about things and how things are done;*
- *[Making] me more open minded and open hearted;* and
- Finding a strong statement of **values** which, for one person, helped them to stretch and expand, or find, their capabilities. Another saw UCV as *a steady force to think out my life*.

- **TPQ1:** Reflecting on your entire experience at UCV, remember a time when you felt most engaged, alive and motivated. Who was involved? What did you do? How did it feel? What happened?
- **TPQ5:** What are the most important things our Unitarian community has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference?
- **TPQ9:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

### Spiritual growth

Among the people who mentioned spiritual benefits gained from being part of UCV, some said that UCV gave them spiritual connections or a foundation. They did not feel alone in their views; they found grounding in purpose and increased possibilities.

- Classes were mentioned as well as **services** that allowed exploration of various religious faiths (2 mentioned



## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

discovering paganism). Another appreciated being able to discuss spirituality in classes led by Steven Epperson.

- Two respondents mentioned the beautiful **services and ceremonies**, and that there had been a stability in some of our rituals through four ministers' time with us.
- One respondent noted that *lay chaplaincy work enhanced my sense of spirituality in the world*. They gave the example of spirituality that was created by participants in weddings that included no reference to any established traditions.

Finally, but worthy of note, three people said what is exemplified in this quote: *[UCV] reinforces my faith in people*. Another said that *UCV gives grounding and respite during times of transition or problems*.

### **Religious Exploration**

About a quarter of all respondents to TPQ1 highlighted Religious Exploration / Learning. Most experiences related to CRE (Children's RE) came from teachers. Obviously, an important indicator of the effects of CRE might also be gleaned by surveying the children involved.

- One member helped create and facilitate a module using fabric art projects which were connected to many learnings. An unexpected outcome she valued was that *one girl, whose hand and arm function were compromised because of a congenital anomaly, went on to make weaving her career!*
- *We created a curriculum which dealt with beliefs of differing religions. We visited some other churches and temples. It was with a wonderful group of teenagers who I still know.*
- A parent noted: *Our children gained a particular view of the world, a religious foundation that had a rational scientific basis, i.e., what you do here and now is what matters.*
- Another parent enjoyed seeing how much her kids got out of the Youth group. *There was no pushing involved, they loved it and still have friends from it.*
- Some mentioned specifically the OWL (Our Whole Lives) programs for children and youth.
- At least one parent mentioned that they found UCV initially because they were looking for an RE program for their children and then stayed even after those children had grown up and left Vancouver.



The remaining RE responses to TPQ1 were related to adult learning experiences during ARE (Adult Religious Exploration), New U, social justice or other events.

- After completing a course on creating one's personal credo, one participant was surprised by the results among the group and said they came to believe that RE is a critical component of UCV programming.
- Three members mentioned how important participating in the Me and White Supremacy group had been for them. *[It] led to deep exploration, so much learning in safe company, an opportunity for the deepest look into my moral soul.*

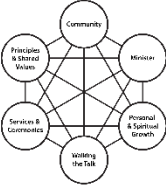
## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

- New U participants appreciated learning about our history and that Unitarian Universalism is a *faith with no dogma and no hierarchy*.
- Two members mentioned working with the young mothers in the Our Children's Table program, *teaching nutrition and cooking with the young mothers, the way everyone cooperated, so much fun and laughter, it was joyous*.
- Through the services auction several years ago, one member had access to outings providing learning about settlers, First Nations and B.C. history. More recently, the blanket exercise was another appreciated hands-on learning experience about lived Indigenous history.

An additional thought from one respondent to TPQ9 was that *there has been little adult education in recent years. I look forward to much more now that we have a DLFD [Director of Lifespan Faith Development]*. Courses like Adult OWL (Our Whole Lives) and others by both members and non-members offer a real exchange of ideas and sources of inspiration.

### **Summary**

Vancouver Unitarians of all ages deeply appreciate the benefits to our personal and spiritual growth, based on our **principles and shared values**, that derive from participation in our **community**, our **services and ceremonies**, our active **walking the talk**, all inspired and guided by our **minister**. They are grateful for the opportunities for lifelong learning in our formal programs as well as in a wide range of other activities and experiences.



## 7. Walking the Talk

The importance of “walking the talk”, or putting our principles and shared values into action, was particularly evident in responses to survey questions TPQ2, TPQ4, TPQ5, and TPQ7.

Responding to TPQ4, members told us overwhelmingly (78%) that the most important and meaningful aspects of our engagement with the world are social actions by individuals and groups. About half mentioned that our members bring to the world the individual and personal transformation they have found through Unitarianism, putting our **principles and shared values** into action, “walking the talk” without seeking recognition.

*I love that what drives the people next to me is concern for justice in our nation and safe guidance for our planet.*

Many of the respondents to TPQ5 noted that the spirit of community, and the **spiritual growth** that contributes to our lives, are closely bound up in the activities we choose to engage in. Similarly, many members (17%) responded in TPQ7 that social activism is the most important life-giving characteristic of our congregation, and it grows out of our willingness, openness, and **UU principles**. Most often mentioned was environment and refugee work, and our presence at protests. Some consider social action to be closely linked with our **personal and spiritual growth**.

*We are at our best when we live and show the rest of the community who and what we are through our actions.*

*When we are engaged, we have a balance between outward and inward-looking thinking, making a difference within ourselves and also to the wider community.*

*I was blown away that [the congregation] respected Earth-based rituals and that social justice actions can be seen as expressions of spirituality.*

*We are at our best in our active care for social justice and environmental protection and each other.*

Of the respondents to TPQ2, 17% mentioned **shared values** as important in their relationships at UCV.

- **TPQ2:** What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships among people at UCV? What would you say has been most valuable about your friendships in this community? Have certain groups been valuable to you? What would you say is most important about how we relate to each other?
- **TPQ4:** What do you believe are the most important and meaningful elements of our congregation’s engagement with the local community, the nation and the world? Describe one or more times when UCV was most faithful to Unitarian values and principles in how we relate to, work in, and act as witness in our community.
- **TPQ5:** What are the most important things our Unitarian community has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference?
- **TPQ7:** What do you think is the most important, life-giving characteristic of our UCV congregation? When we are at our best? What is the single most important value or characteristic that makes Unitarians or UCV unique?

## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

*The most valuable aspects of [my UCV] friendships were continuity, shared values and community outreach.*

*The best way to relate to others is rallying around common values and passions.*

*We relate to each other charitably even when we disagree because we share bigger goals and Unitarian values.*

Comments about how Unitarians “walk the talk” were the second most numerous during the ROI Workshops (along with services and ceremonies, and after community). Participants mentioned that we are action-oriented and demonstrate “values in action” as we engage with other individuals and groups outside our own congregation.

### **How We Walk the Talk**

Broadly speaking, members spoke about both actions *within* our own congregation and actions *beyond* our congregation which engage us with our city, country and world.

Most often mentioned in response to TPQ4 were environmental action, including wild salmon (48%), supporting refugees (42%), and social justice events and actions (28%). Twenty percent noted the importance of marches, rallies, protests, and arrests as important and meaningful elements of our engagement with the broader community. Other social actions that were mentioned include supporting First Nations and indigenous rights, organizing and putting on all candidate’s meetings, support for affordable housing, actions in the Downtown East Side, UCV’s Outreach Opportunities Fund, and making UCV space available to support social justice action, including providing safe housing for refugees. Some also mentioned UCV’s support for draft dodgers during the 1960s.

*I highly value working together with others on common purposes.*



At least three members mentioned that it is important that we live our principles within our own congregation (rather than focusing on "internal debates") as well as in our outreach work. They urged us to continue our respect for diversity and democracy as well as building community.



When considering Unitarian **principles and values** which support outreach (in TPQ4), some members thought that, while other faith groups also do community work, our direct community participation and collaboration with other social justice organizations is distinctive to Unitarians. It was also noted that our campus lends itself to being a space for community meetings and activities, and that this is supported by us being non-judgmental, welcoming of everyone, and having a sense of curiosity and openness when being active in the community. One

## *Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report*

member emphasized that it is important for UCV members to build trust with local Indigenous people, and to learn from their wisdom, so that we can work together.

Just under half of the respondents to TPQ5 identified one or more activities, over a wide range, that contributed to their lives. These were often tied into, or expressions of, UCV as a **community** or as a place for **personal and spiritual growth**. Among the activities mentioned were:

- Sunday services, special services by a minister, and sermons. These responses reinforce similar responses to other questions that show the central importance of the **minister** and their **services** and sermons.
- Music was cited more than any other activity, mostly but not always about singing in the choir.
- Several people named the Environment Team, the Religious Exploration programs, and the Care and Concern Team among the most important contributions to their life.
- The many other activities cited included the Lay Chaplains, covenant groups, Fry Creek Wilderness Camp, women's and men's groups, the Refugee Team, book club, Oak Street Farmers' Market, and one-time or annual events.

*My men's group meetings are without fail life-affirming, supportive and the fellowship sustains me.*

*We (women's group) have been meeting for years - allows us to respect each other in a deep way, sharing difficulties, humour, acknowledging we have different concepts of our lives, playing together.*



The examples of how we walk the talk offered during the ROI workshops echoed those mentioned above in response to TPQ4 and TPQ5.

Forty-five respondents to TPQ2 included 66 mentions of 34 specific activities that were meaningful to them. These included the What Do We Call Ourselves Task Force, messy church, potluck dinners, gardening, and buildings and grounds work as ways to be useful and to get to know others with similar interests. Members of the environment and refugee teams were clear about how meaningful it was to learn and work with the wider community involved in such service.

*People are willing to get things done even if they have different opinions.*

### **Summary**

A strong majority of Vancouver Unitarians told us that the most important and meaningful aspects of our engagement with each other and the world are social actions by individuals and groups; how we walk the talk. The **personal and spiritual growth** that contributes to our lives is closely bound up with the activities we choose to engage in. Many responded that social activism is the most important life-giving characteristic of our **community**, and it grows out of our willingness, openness, and commitment to our **principles and shared values**. This engagement and activism take a myriad of forms within our congregation and in the wider community and world.



## 8. How We Contribute

Member contributions to UCV life through activities, skills, personalities, and perspectives were reflected in their responses to TPQ6. Activities and involvement were also mentioned in responses to TPQ2, TPQ7, and TPQ8 and in the ROI Workshops.

Ninety percent of respondents to TPQ6 described the way they contribute to UCV with the activities they engage in. This was also reflected in 45 respondents (to TPQ2) who mentioned engagement through activity as the healthiest aspect of relationships at UCV.

*I am aware that my experience will be as rich as my engagement.*

Sixty-one of the activities mentioned in TPQ6 related to the Sunday services, from giving the homily, worship services planning and execution, music participation, tech support, official greeters to *sitting next to someone in the sanctuary* reflecting the importance of **services and ceremonies** seen in many of the responses.

Engagement was also high (59) in activities directly related to running an organization of this size, from being a board trustee, participating in task forces, serving on committees such as Buildings and Grounds, and Canvass, to participating in gardening.

**Walking the talk** activities concerning environment, social justice, and refugees were mentioned by 19 respondents to TPQ6. This corresponds with 17% in TPQ7 who indicated that social activism was the most life-giving characteristic of the congregation. Involvement in child/youth/adult religious exploration; groups such as covenant, men's, women's, IBPOC, and GSA; and social activities reflected the many other ways members are engaged.

Forty-one percent of TPQ6 respondents mentioned their skills as a way of contributing. These broadly organize into ideas and organization skills; people or group skills including deep listening and facilitation; artistic and creativity skills (with music mentioned most often); and technical skills.

One third of respondents described some aspect of their personality as a way they contribute. Fourteen self-described as being friendly, good at engaging and connecting with people, six self-described as being optimistic, and having positive energy. Curiosity and sense of humour were also mentioned. Overall, the personality traits revolved around building the community that gives important meaning to so many members.

- **TPQ2:** What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships among people at UCV? What would you say has been most valuable about your friendships in this community? Have certain groups been valuable to you? What would you say is most important about how we relate to each other?
- **TPQ6:** What are the most valuable ways you contribute to our congregation – your personality, your perspectives, your skills, your activities?
- **TPQ7:** What do you think is the most important, life-giving characteristic of our UCV congregation? When we are at our best? What is the single most important value or characteristic that makes Unitarians or UCV unique?
- **TPQ8:** Make three wishes for the future of our Vancouver Unitarian congregation.

## ***Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report***

Ten percent of respondents to TPQ6 mentioned their perspectives as a contribution, and these were diverse. One spoke of *experience working to defend Indigenous rights*, two mentioned being *big picture thinkers*, another mentioned *an open heart and a critical mind*, another being *grateful for my age and experience which I can and do share*, and another noted that *UCV provides me with a focus to express my gratitude to life for all the blessings I have received*.

A few respondents (6) to TPQ8 wished for more involvement of members. *More volunteerism; wish that work was more spread out across more people*.

In one ROI group there was a statement for *volunteers [to] step up and step back following succession planning for longevity*.

### **Summary**

Vancouver Unitarians contribute to our **community** life through a wide range of activities, skills, personalities, and perspectives. Many respondents mentioned engagement through activity, both within and beyond our congregation, as the healthiest, most life-giving characteristic of our community. In the wider world, **walking the talk** through activism for environmental and social justice, and through sponsoring refugees, was highlighted.



## 9. Other Perspectives

The Thought-Provoking Questions were designed to evoke appreciative responses. Occasionally, respondents offered more critical perspectives in response to the themes of **Community, Principles and Shared Values** and **Walking the Talk**. These showed up in responses to TPQ2, TPQ4, TPQ5, and TPQ8, as well as in our other information sources.

Despite the sense of **community** that shows up so often in the TPQ2 and TPQ8 responses, not everyone finds people at UCV welcoming.

*While involved at UCV [she] has not made personal friends, observes that most people don't seem to be needing new friends, not generally very friendly.*

*Coffee hour is painful; others don't reach out, I'm not outgoing. I feel cliquishness. People catch up on business and gather with those they already know; I don't approach strangers. UCV's view of "Community" doesn't fit my view. There are little communities. It's hard to walk into established groups.*

*[I wish for] the community to be more welcoming to everyone, especially newcomers, particularly if they are young or BIPOC.*

Not every respondent feels respected, which challenges both UCV's sense of **community** and its **principles and shared values**.

*[I] need a sense of being heard and respected – my opinions and presence valued – that everyone is seen, heard, and valued – including all ages and genders, IBPOC and non-IBPOC. [I] need a sense of safety and that it's OK and valued to challenge someone from a sector of our society that has generally more power and privilege, including older white men.*

One of the seven intentions and hopes that Jamie Homeniuk shared in the January 30, 2022 service, based on input from four UCV groups, was their desire *to find a way to reconcile ourselves with changes inside our community, to heal from old conflicts within our community, and continue moving forward hand in hand*. Participants from at least seven ROI Workshops shared statements that spoke to *better conflict facilitation/tools, a desire for conflicts to be resolved without relationships ending, and a wish for better use of the Covenant of Healthy Relations*. One expressed the hope that *we view conflict not as a rupture or an opportunity to*

- **TPQ2:** What are the healthiest, most life-giving aspects of the relationships among people at UCV? What would you say has been most valuable about your friendships in this community? Have certain groups been valuable to you? What would you say is most important about how we relate to each other?
- **TPQ4:** What do you believe are the most important and meaningful elements of our congregation's engagement with the local community, the nation and the world? Describe one or more times when UCV was most faithful to Unitarian values and principles in how we relate to, work in, and act as witness in our community.
- **TPQ5:** What are the most important things our Unitarian community has contributed to your life? Who or what made a difference?
- **TPQ8:** Make three wishes for the future of our Vancouver Unitarian congregation.

## ***Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report***

*argue, but as an opportunity to consider new information and to learn. All these concerns are well summarized in this aspirational (possibility) statement of how we hope to act in the future: We honour our Covenant of Healthy Relations and work collectively to uphold it and constructively confront differences and disagreements.*

While many UCV congregants value the practice of **walking our talk**, some expressed concern over a perception of smugness.

*I wish the congregation as a whole was less self-righteous. I wish we took more concrete steps to demonstrate our commitment to reconciliation with Indigenous People.*

*[It's] important to get out of any sense of "righteousness" and instead remember we UU's are part of a larger, wide-ranging community of faith-holding folks who care and act.*

Other respondents to TPQ4 questioned the depth of UCV's commitment to **walking the talk**.

*I think we are pretty disconnected/siloed.*

*We're not engaged in our local community or world (except the refugee committee), we're not reflective of the wider community.*

*The number of congregants who actually do anything to support outside groups or help other congregants is quite small.*

Although UCV sees itself as an open and liberal community, welcoming people of all spiritual backgrounds from Protestant and Catholic, to Jews and Buddhists, Muslims, Pagans, atheists, etc., some respondents felt the language used suggests an emphasis on Judeo-Christianity rather than a reflection of our **principles and shared values**.

*I don't relate to the words "worship" or "faith".*

*I have met wonderful folks and have made very good friends. If it weren't called a "church" I would stay on as a member.*

*We do not think of UCV as a "faith" community. We think of UCV as a group of open, kind, thoughtful people who are committed to and live UCV principles. We feel the term "faith" implies a requirement of unreasoning belief.*

### **Summary**

Critical comments were few but evidently important and indicate challenges UCV needs to seriously consider. They suggest we have work to do in welcoming and including new members in our community, in ensuring minority voices are truly heard, in managing conflict within our congregation, and in how we represent ourselves to each other and the broader community.



## 10. Conclusions

Respondents to our TPQs, participants in our ROI workshops, and those who shared their feedback in other ways deeply appreciated all dimensions of the interdependent web of the Vancouver Unitarians. While there is always work to do to strengthen and build our community, there is great optimism for our future.

Vancouver Unitarians feel that they have found a home in the UCV community. They cherish the people, the quality of relationships, and the respectful and positive interactions within and beyond the congregation. Many express a desire to increase our ethnic and economic diversity, and to attract more families and younger members.

Our principles and shared values drew many members to Unitarianism and UCV. They are the bedrock of the congregation, inspiring our personal and spiritual growth and stimulating our outreach and activism in the broader community.

Vancouver Unitarians of all ages appreciate the personal and spiritual growth they find in our principles and shared values, the Sunday services, and the opportunities for learning and action that come with participation in our community.

The minister is central to our UCV life, often directly responsible for people choosing to join our community. Their services and thought-provoking homilies shape the worship experiences that support our personal and spiritual growth. Members deeply value the minister's ability to lead, challenge, inspire and show compassion, and to model living our principles and shared values.

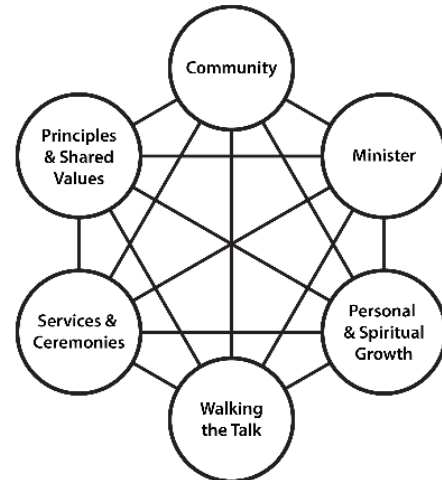
The elements of our services and ceremonies - setting, rituals, homilies and music - bring people into UCV and help sustain them here as they deepen their connections to all aspects of UCV life.

The personal and spiritual growth in our lives is closely tied to the activities we choose to engage in. A strong majority of Vancouver Unitarians told us that our social activism, how we walk the talk based on our principles and shared values, is the most important characteristic of our community.

Members contribute to our community life through a wide range of activities, skills, personalities, and perspectives. Many respondents mentioned engagement through activity, both within and beyond our congregation, as the healthiest, most life-giving characteristic of our community.

Vancouver Unitarians also reminded us that we cannot rest on our laurels. While we have much to appreciate and celebrate, we still have work to do – in welcoming and including new members in our community, in ensuring minority voices are truly heard, in managing conflict within our congregation, and in how we represent ourselves to each other and the broader community.

Finally, we did not find any “surprises” in our identity investigations. There is a broad consensus about our defining characteristics, views which are very much in keeping with who we have been since our pioneering members started this congregation in 1909. This finding



## ***Rethinking Our Identity as Vancouver Unitarians: Report***

points to our great strength – we have a strong and clear sense of our identity which has stood the test of time.

**From “Celebrating Our Story”  
by Rev. Stephen Epperson  
September 15, 2019**

Let’s return to words spoken at the dedication of our new home here exactly fifty-five years ago by the people who built this place with their time, money, sweat and vision. *Let [the achievement of this place] be the realization of our dreams and ever remain a present charge upon our minds and hearts and hands.* The result, they said, *will be a joyful song of continuing creation.* Continuing creation! What a gift to pass down to those who would rise in the future and gather in this place and join our congregation!

This is a statement of Unitarian faith at its finest. A passionately rational, hope-filled expectation that we are at our best when we encourage each other in spiritual and ethical growth and when, together, we set out on that free and responsible search for truth and meaning with justice, equity and compassion as our guides.