

First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon

Listening Circles Executive Summary 9/18/2024

A total of ten in-person and on-line Listening Circle sessions were held on August 25th and 28th, and September 8. The in-person sessions were oversubscribed but the online offering had only two sessions one of which included Lay Ministers. This represents approximately 120 congregants and included divergent points of view. Many participants suggested continuing the Learning Circles.

Background: As related in the Listening Circles, First Unitarian Church of Portland's history over the last 20 years includes questions about how management has taken place in the context of Policy-based Governance, in particular the style of management that preceded the call of Rev. Alison Miller in 2022. Issues around the Music Ministry Leadership began before Rev. Miller arrived and continued until the Music Director DeReau Farrar was asked to resign.

These events have led to significant grief and anger for many choir members and congregants and strife within the music program and congregation.

The Listening Circles were developed to give congregants and others an opportunity to share their past and current experiences and to offer suggestions for the future.

A detailed summary of the Listening Circle feedback follows at the end of this Executive Summary.

Listening Circles Main Themes:

The Music Program, RE Involvement and the Men's Group and the Alliance were mentioned as major draws for First Unitarian Church.

The Policy Governance Model and its relationship to the Executive Team need to be reviewed and strengthened.

The structure and operation of the Executive Team need to be reviewed and strengthened.

Committees for the Ministers, Staff and Congregants need to be implemented (eg. Right Relations, Ministerial Relations, and Staff Relations)

Many people would like to be able to provide more input to the church decision making process including budget, policies, and programming.

Communications between the Board, Ministers and Staff and the congregation need to become timelier, more transparent, and include the rationale behind decisions.

Staff need to have job descriptions, regular evaluations and coaching to enable them to succeed.

Emphasis should be placed on providing connections for both new members and for those wanting to become involved in groups and committees.

This summary is not intended to be comprehensive. It is a summary of the most often made comments during the Listening Circles. Please see the detailed Listening Circle feedback for other additional themes and concerns.

Suggestions from congregants:

Develop processes for providing input and transparency.

Provide a regular board report on decisions made and the rationale for those decisions.

Provide more information about ways to connect in Front Steps or from the pulpit

Quarterly all church discussions

Regular standing committee reports.

Acknowledgement of the grief of many people.

Healing Services and Sermons

Walk the talk regarding Anti-Oppression

Annual Meeting to take the pulse of the Congregation

More Listening/Brainstorming Circles for policy solution suggestions.

More Covenant Groups

Suggestion Box

More child and adolescent involvement in services

Process for identifying congregants who have conflict resolution skills who are willing to help

Develop a process for staff to provide feedback to their supervisors

Social Justice Committee could be a good right relations model.

We need congregant ombudsmen/bridge builders to work within the church community.

Conflict resolution classes are needed.

Listening Circles Summary, v2.0, compiled by R. Tobin 9/15/24, revised 9/20/24

This document is meant as a summary and roll up of comments related to the main themes raised in the Listening Circles. Full details are available upon request. The comments are grouped by topics that are presented in no particular order. Within each topic, the comment statements are also presented in no particular order. Many of the comments came up more than once. Please note that most Listening Circle participants have been involved in the church for years. Many strong opinions were communicated.

1. Overall questions

- a. How does the board understand what the congregation is thinking?
- b. Why was FAQ distribution by request only?
- c. What will the UUA's continuing involvement be in the healing process?
- d. What was the original complaint against Alison, by DeReau?
- e. What is the timeline of the next steps in this process?
- f. Does the ET have a say over who can serve on the Board?
- g. Does the current issue stem from personality differences, or are there larger conflicts at play?

2. Communications

- a. Pace of communication to the congregation is too slow. (FAQ took too long to get out, and it needs to be revised with more information.)
- b. Official communication is sparse and does not provide enough reasoning to congregants about critical decisions.
- c. Need more updates on what various teams are really doing.
- d. Have regular (quarterly) all-church discussions / meetings to give congregants opportunities to engage.
- e. Standing committees should report regularly on what they are doing.
- f. Communications to the church staff from congregants are often not acknowledged.
- g. The Board should write about governance and board issues in the Front Steps.
- h. Need clarity on all the communication channels. What are they?
- i. Need visibility and transparency on all the work that is currently going on to fix the dysfunction.
- j. Need more introductions of various groups perhaps on Sunday and/or in the Front Steps. For instance, what is the Alliance?
- k. Need a commitment from the ET and the Board to respond to (or at least acknowledge) all emails from congregants. Some folks are feeling shutdown.
- l. Too much gossip, not enough facts.
- m. Address misinformation directly with true facts and backup.

3. Leadership

- a. Feeling that "leadership" is not demonstrably taking responsibility or ownership of the issues.
- b. Impression that current minister is not showing humility or responsibility.
- c. Leadership does not listen to congregants who have useful advice/opinions/skills to offer.

- d. Confusion as to the ministry power of the choir leaders vs. the main ministers.
- e. How is the ET membership decided? Why does it include someone who wasn't chosen by the congregation in one way or another?
- f. Not clear how much leadership the Board provides.
- g. Seems like the ET has a great amount of unchecked power.
- h. Congregation needs to be part of major decisions. It feels like they have no voice now.
- i. There needs to be a group that advises the minister, the ET and the Board, starting with a Ministerial Relations committee / Committee on the Ministry.
- j. Look at the collaboration team in Social Justice for a good model.
- k. Get more input from congregants before major decisions are made.
- l. Help define good stewardship in the congregation.

4. Governance

- a. Current policy governance model does not seem to be working. Too much power concentrated in the Executive Team, and the board is far less evident.
- b. Many congregants have no knowledge of what the governance model is.
- c. The congregation has little power and insight into issues.
- d. Too many top-down decisions.
- e. More democratic collaborative process involving Board, Staff, ET, and Congregants is needed.
- f. We are too siloed and have been for a long time.
- g. Much more transparency needed (within legal bounds).
- h. Solicit Congregant feedback before decisions.
- i. Board meetings do not have enough time for issues raised by congregants. Input seems to be discouraged.
- j. More democracy is needed.
- k. Educate members on the bylaws and structure of church leadership.
- l. Path for bottom-up input / feedback is invisible / non-existent.
- m. More emphasis on using consensus not just voting.
- n. Board should publish an annual report on all aspects of the church.

5. Staff

- a. Staff does not have an avenue of recourse if they have an issue with directions or decisions.
- b. All staff should receive performance reviews / feedback regularly.
- c. Staff and others should be able to provide feedback to superiors without retribution.
- d. Need non-staff advocates for staff.
- e. Staff departures haven't been as transparent as desired.
- f. Clear (and available) job descriptions are needed for all staff and volunteer leader positions.
- g. Regular staff evaluations should be performed.
- h. Continue hiring competent staff for communication, social media presence, etc.
- i. Reasons for people leaving are generally not stated or acknowledged.
- j. The "why" of people leaving needs to be stated in order to show that there is due process being followed.

6. Music

- a. We need to rebuild a strong and vibrant music program.
- b. Want to see more programs in music restored, such as bell choir.

- c. Want to see more diversity in the music presented.
- d. Suggest a re-envisioning of the music program, with greater emphasis on service to the liturgy, rather than performance.
- e. Make more effort to have the music and the sermon related.
- f. Bring back the hymnals – the screens do not work well for the side galleries.

7. Right relations

- a. Show compassion to folks who are “being difficult.”
- b. Differentiate between interpersonal / structural problems.
- c. Having strong-minded people around is useful if you can coordinate their energy.
- d. We don’t talk about what we learned in healing the divisions. We should.
- e. Nobody should get “trashed” in comments from the pulpit.
- f. We need bridge-builders or ombudsmen in the congregation.
- g. Recognize that all questions are valid.
- h. We need a well-known process for asking questions and getting them acknowledged, and hopefully answered.
- i. When people complain, we need to encourage them to be part of a solution.
- j. We need to continue work on the 8th principle.
- k. We need more opportunities for dialogue that involve congregants, the Board, and the ET.
- l. We don’t have a good track record at managing conflict in any form.
- m. When people sense conflict, they should point it out.
- n. Ministers should support conflict resolution.
- o. Emphasize proactive rather than reactive policies / procedures.
- p. Recognize when groups, not just individuals, need pastoral care.
- q. We need to decouple DeReau’s specific situation from the anti-racism work we have been doing.

8. Engagement

- a. RE involvement is a big draw. Alleged dismissal of RE leadership was a major negative.
- b. Our music program has been and is also a major draw for involvement. Loss of Music Leadership is a big blow.
- c. Other groups (like the Men’s group) are important to the health of the church.
- d. People do not know how to get involved. There is not a good guide for what opportunities exist.
- e. Create a better process/ roadmap for how people can be involved in committees.
- f. We need a process for people to voice their disappointment and disagreements on an ongoing basis.
- g. We need to ensure that when people join a particular program (like the choir) they know that they are part of the overall church.
- h. Need more efforts like Danielle’s summer programs to make connections.
- i. Consider that meeting times for congregants need to include those for working folks.
- j. Work on making younger people and teenagers feel welcome.

9. Community

- a. Need to address how the church is being perceived in the larger community because of the current crisis.

- b. We need to define, and practice what “beloved community” means for First UU.
- c. More / better PR for the outside community.
- d. Provide more assistance to people who would like to come to church but have issues with on-line connections or ride assistance.
- e. Keep Equity in mind for defining the role of the church in outside activities.
- f. People would like a published (on-line) congregant roster so that they can make connections with other congregants.
- g. Would like to see support for building neighborhood groups.

10. Finance

- a. We need much more transparency about financial policy and decisions.
- b. We need more information as to how money is supporting various programs and staff.
- c. A regular report (written) from the Finance Committee would help.
- d. Reasoning on decisions of what to fund (or not) should be published.
- e. A short seminar on how the church finances are structured would be helpful.
- f. Need to address reduction in pledges due to reactions to the crisis.

11. Current conflict

- a. Current conflict is hard for some people (new, uninvolved) to understand.
- b. People don’t know how to “help” during the current crisis.
- c. We don’t know how to handle conflict.
- d. Conflict level is exceedingly high and difficult to manage individually.
- e. Individuals are not feeling “safe” in the sanctuary.
- f. Need better guidelines on “protest.”
- g. Too many young people have left because of the recent conflicts.
- h. WHY did DeReau leave? We need all the facts.
- i. Please share in as much detail as possible the Board’s role throughout the DeReau issue.
- j. What are we doing to try to retain members who are thinking about leaving?
- k. We need to recognize that there are systemic issues of conflict in the church.
- l. Need a better balance between social justice action and our other values.

12. Healing process

- a. Rebuild trust between all parties.
- b. Emphasize finding the Common Ground / Common Chalice.
- c. Have classes / sessions on conflict resolution.
- d. Healing process is not progressing fast enough. Need more engagement from all parties and at a faster tempo.
- e. Leaders need to demonstrate that they are listening to feedback and protests.
- f. Not all internal issues need to be confidential.
- g. Need to ensure that dissidents are not “hated.”
- h. Rev. Alison needs to acknowledge publicly her responsibility in the crisis, and what she will change. She has just started down this path and needs to continue.
- i. Need to move to resolution of our problems by telling the complete truth.
- j. Try to involve ex-congregants and former Board members in future Listening Circles.
- k. We all need to state what has been learned in this conflict. Do this openly.
- l. We should have a healing service.

- m. Need to acknowledge and honor the contributions of all the staff that have left.
- n. Need to encourage increased visibility by the ET and Board.
- o. Some sermon topics should be about healing.
- p. There needs to be more acknowledgement of the grief.
- q. Continued dialogue is vitally important.
- r. Cross-generation and cross-race conversations need to happen.
- s. Divisions within the choir(s) need to be addressed.
- t. We need a conflict transformation team.
- u. Walk our talk on anti-oppression.
- v. Ministers and Board should ask the Ushers about the things they hear in the Narthex.
- w. Have a regular (yearly?) congregational meeting to take the pulse of the congregation.
- x. Have listening circles focused on items of church policy.

13. Looking Ahead

- a. Church needs strategic planning for the future in many dimensions.
- b. Why do people want to be involved? Answer to this is key for planning and growth.
- c. We need to be a friendlier and more welcoming and open church.
- d. All programs need to be integrated. No more silos.
- e. Need to review and revise the bylaws in an open and transparent manner.
- f. We need to have an open, honest discussion of issues caused by Marilyn's style and also for Bill's style in order to craft a clearer future.
- g. Keep running the Listening Circles periodically and make them topical.
- h. Use Lay Leaders more in the Sunday services.
- i. Promote more programs like Wellspring and other Adult RE programs for faith / formation development.
- j. Why aren't we promoting more covenant groups?
- k. Promote education on conflict resolution, especially within the church.
- l. Need brainstorming circles, not just listening circles.
- m. Have a physical / virtual suggestion box.
- n. RE for the youngest kids needs more integration into the service.
- o. Make youth-oriented services more frequent and better planned.
- p. Safety committee concerns are not being taken seriously.
- q. We need to promote diversity in our congregation. How do we do that?
- r. More discussion groups (in general) are needed.