

Responses Part 2 — Emerson's Culture

These questions guided the discussion about Emerson's culture:

- What did you have to learn about Emerson's congregational culture (rules and customs, spoken and unspoken) when you first came/visited/joined?*
- Which of these are still a part of the culture?*
- Which do you think bring us closer together as a beloved community? Are there any that we would like to leave behind as we move forward?*
- Has Emerson's culture changed during the COVID years? How?*
- How would you help a new minister "learn the norms" as that person settles in?*
- How can the congregation help a new minister to feel comfortable and at home during the first year or two?*

How do we see Emerson's culture?

- Theology is far from traditional.
- People don't want to encounter uncomfortable conversations.
- A bridge between traditional Christianity to Unitarian Universalism
- We used to talk more about Jesus as a teacher.
- It is a spiritual community.
- You find your higher self. It is a search for a higher self.
- Taking control of our concept of God.
- We have lost some good things, but kept some things.
- One good thing we have kept is our caring for each other.
- As we get older, we look for a support system.
- Open minded, open hearted
- Exchange of respect
- Exciting ideas and things
- Willingness to explore
- Low pressure
- Adapting to a post pandemic world
- There are things you don't know until you screw them up.
- Welcoming to "well-behaved" children.
- Reluctance from adults to being playful.
- Excitement at someone who is new and different.
- Figuring out who makes change can be difficult.
 - Which committee decides what?
 - Hard to flowchart decision making processes
- High emphasis on structure
- Anything implicit is "insider" information
- Assumption: Parents are going to take care of RE
- We exhaust volunteers.
- We overpromise without considering capacity.

- Expectations for a future that aren't based on the present.
- The false sense that what was is going to be in the future.
- Adjusting to where we are now. The past has become part of the culture ("the good old days").
- Hard for someone new to break into groups to talk. There are no ways to get acquainted in a comfortable way. (e.g. No tables/chairs around which both old and new people could gather.)
- Music is very important to this congregation.
- Religious education is important, guided by a professional to work with children and youth.
- Adult religious education has been at 10:00 am ONLY.
- A seemingly rigid schedule of only one activity at a time. Nothing on Sunday evenings or any weeknight evenings. Continuing perceived wisdom
- Gap between aspiration and willingness to commit
- A lot of dedication. A lot of energy for many different ideas
- Greeters value welcome, the process of feeling known
- Connection between people is important to new people. (Mark used to take them for pizza lunch.)
- The culture is very white, cisgender, wealthy, and left of center, but there is potential for growth in all of these areas.
- We are able to work together around difficult issues: the MAM challenge, for example.
- Friendly culture, friendly socially, invited to do things, easy to find friends
- Somewhat more "conservative" than most UU congregations
- More rigid than we aspire to be with regard to people who are not like us
- We have treasured rituals and would appreciate having more.
- Most embrace the Seven Principles
- Long-time members have "claimed" their own pews
- Over time, the culture has changed from somewhat UU Christian to more humanist (not everyone is happy about that)
- Has become much less formal
- Welcoming
- More "Emersonian" than UU

What did you have to learn about Emerson's congregational culture (rules and customs, spoken and unspoken) when you first came/visited/joined?

- How to handle some people not being as welcoming when you are new.
- When we first came to Emerson some people felt judgmental.
- How to handle someone not being welcomed
- Place names, (Delaney Hall, etc.)
- Not a lot of culture shock (from/to relatively formal religious experience. Today: an interesting group of people, but I'll go check out other places.
- Culture shift, wealth was obvious. People talked about travel, arts, what educated, affluent people do.

What is still a part of the culture?

- Intimidating
- Long ago - culture felt familiar to those who were church-goers
- Traditional
- Welcoming
- Little "G" versus big "G"
- Lack of spiritual foundation - asking big questions
- Adult Ed is not about UU faith, not based in the spiritual
- Highly educated
- Typical church with cliques & rivalries
- Welcome, sense of community
- Talking about trips
- Still very friendly, try to include people in social activities, be inviting
- Who has the power to do something? (This is still true.)
- Who knows what? (This is still true.)
- The theology. How to accept abstraction. How to deal with ambiguity. (This is still true.)
- Where will I fit in? (This is still true. How do we encourage folks to find a place?)
- Cliques (but not as much as in the past perhaps)
- Being "voluntold" to do things (This is still true.)

Are there any that we would like to leave behind as we move forward?

- Wringing our hands about the endowment
- Concerns about how much we are paying the minister
- Rigidity of adult RE programming / lack of choices
- Competition with other UU congregations
- "Voluntolding"
- Only greeters welcoming visitors. We'd like all congregants to be welcomers - talking to visitors and to members who they don't know.

Has Emerson's culture changed during the COVID years? How? (Or what is the same? What is different?)

- It has gutted the heart of our church.
- We have lost the personal connection.
- I am discouraged. I hope we can rebuild the things that connected us.
- I am out of the habit of going to church.

- Lost sense of connection and community, online not the same, makes it more difficult for new people to be incorporated into the community (although many younger people do feel more comfortable online)
- COVID brought us into that "new age"
- Created presence in the YouTube world
- Less connection

- More technology & more ways of being together
- Stronger reliance on covenant groups
- In-person attendance is significantly decreased, but online attendance is new and significant. (Combined, current in-person attendance plus online viewership is almost equivalent to in-person attendance pre-COVID.)
- Suffering loss of contact post-COVID
- Relying on Zoom too much
- We are using online platforms now.
- Friendliness & happiness at being together.
- Fewing mini-committee meetings in the Gathering Place now.
- More committee meetings online.
- LUUnch BUUnch
- Fewer members in church