

# **Committee On Shared Ministry Report:**

## **First Unitarian Church of Oakland Worship Services**

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## **COSM Report: First Unitarian Church of Oakland Worship Services**

Following the formation of the COSM in the spring/summer of 2016 we were asked by Reverend Jacqueline to review our church's two worship services. Soon after we were also asked by Board members to investigate the viability of two worship services. Our investigation included interviews with staff (Stefan Schneider), worship team members (Gary and Jean Facente, Stefan, and Daisy Quan), ministers (Reverends Jacqueline Duhart, Sheri Prud'homme, and Abbey Tennis), and Jodie Mathies, who, as part of the membership team, had conducted previous surveys of service attendees. We reviewed those previous surveys, observed first and second services, and finally circulated an online and hardcopy survey of service attendees and church members (See Appendix A & B).

**Our good news is that respondents are overwhelmingly very happy with the quality and content of our worship services.**

### **Key Findings**

- 128 respondents returned on-line or hard copy surveys (See Appendix C). This is a robust sample size, given the size of our church.
- Respondents listed three main areas of worship as their favorite parts of Sunday worship. These included: sermon (77%), choir (75%), worship associate (68%).
- Of the survey respondents, 53% of respondents have been members of the church for 10 or more years. 17% have been members for 2-4 years, and 16% have been members for less than one year (See Appendix D).

### **Assumptions About Two Services**

Leading up to our investigation we had heard the following assumptions about the services:

1. There were two services because one service had reached capacity, and when you were close to capacity new attendees felt uncomfortable, and therefore would not return. We did not find this to be true. In fact, the article included as Appendix E describes how this idea of seating capacity and participation in worship should be considered.

Our church varies in attendance during our two services. For example, the attendance at two services on January 22, 2017, was 180. At the two services following the November election, on November 13, there were a total of 244 attendees. At the following week's service, there was one service with 174 attendees. Worship service attendance numbers can swing widely, but we have heard from Rev. Jacqueline that we have 250+ "members", but she estimates that we have a "community" of 350.

Based on the criteria described by Reverend Robert Latham in his book Moving On From Church Folly Lane: The Pastoral to Program Shift we feel these numbers indicate that we are in the status of a program church, and we have probably been there for a number of years (Latham, page 11). Our ministers are quite clear – in terms of workload and relationship dynamics between them and congregants – we are a program church.

In consulting with Stefan we established that seating on the main floor of the church is 200 (See Appendix F). When we looked at Winter/Spring 2016 attendance we found that the *average/mean* attendance at the second service was 115 (58% of capacity), and *average/mean* attendance at the first service was 39 (20% of capacity). The *mode* for the second service was 100, the *range* was 100, and the *median* was 105. It is clear that we are rarely close to seating capacity (See Appendices G, H, I).

2. We had heard that staff and ministers were not happy with having a second service, because it was so lightly attended, and therefore not worth their time and effort.

Our interviews did not substantiate this opinion.

3. We also were told that the content of the 9:20 AM service was different from the 11:20 AM service, because: 1) There were congregants who wanted a more contemplative and meditative service, and objected to Joyful Noise and other church music. We did not directly interview or survey people on this issue. Our survey did indicate that Joyful Noise was a “favorite thing” of 57.8% of respondents, and a “least favorite thing” of 14.1% of respondents. Choir was a “favorite thing” of 75% of respondents. We did not find that there was an expressed need for a “different” or more contemplative service. While some respondents indicated that they felt they responded well to different styles of worship (based on their personal needs on any given day) there was no feedback that indicated a need for two different worship options on a regular and ongoing basis for the full congregation.

Attendees at the first service who indicated that they exclusively attend this service have one primary thing in common – they have, for the most part, been a member of the church for 10+ years (12 of 15 respondents).

We intentionally constructed the survey to not “compare” the services, or pit one against the other. We explicitly asked about what respondents liked/disliked (favorite/least favorite). We did not specify better/worse, or relate questions specifically to the first or second service. We noted that some of the answers we received might reflect what was happening on the particular day that the respondent completed the survey. For example, if the survey indicated that the respondent did not like hymns it may be because a hymn was hard to sing on that day.

### **Worship and Worship Leaders**

In preparing for this investigation we read and discussed Robert Latham's book [Moving On From Church Folly Lane: The](#)

Pastoral to Program Shift. One key part of this book is Latham's emphasis on service design and stimulating preaching. He says that, "because the community has gathered to experience provocative insight and spirited challenge ... it is the service itself that must provide the basis for whatever sense of bonded community is experienced during worship." This highlights the importance of evaluating and structuring worship that is continually exciting and stimulating.

Latham says that worship must, "elicit a sense of drama that captivates the individual worshiper and draws them into confronting the personal journey within that of the congregational community and the existing world." If this is not done then the worshiper can usually find other things to fill their time on a Sunday. He goes on to say that, "the primary focus of the program congregation is its program. It is the worship experience on Sunday mornings that constantly reminds the membership of the growth possibilities that are inherent in its larger program ministry. The Sunday service provides a hint of what might be in store for those who engage in this programmatic ministry. It announces the possibility of pursuing a greater depth." (Pages 46–47.) How does the service express the church's "larger program ministry", and urge attendees to engage in it?

Therefore, we feel that those designing and preparing the worship service take on an extremely important role. Those ministers, staff, and lay people responsible for worship should be engaged in training and discussion on what it means to have a service that "provides provocative insight and spirited challenge." There should also be a process to observe, and critique the service in order to analyze it, and craft future services that meet the criteria that Latham describes.

It should be decided who will observe and critique each service. This evaluation can then be captured on a Worship Evaluation form. We did review the current Worship Team's *Sunday Morning Feedback Feedback/Reflection Sheet* (See Appendix J). If it is decided to more closely observe and critique each

service then this form could be revised to look for a service that has “provocative insight and spirited challenge”. We also feel that any evaluation of the service should consider how the service furthered our church’s mission and vision, including being anti-oppressive, and becoming an intentionally multiracial, multicultural, multigenerational congregation.

We emphasize this because we know that membership growth will not happen through "innovative service design", but only through "transformative message and compelling program."

Worship leaders should consider the following areas based on survey data (See Appendix K):

- 9 survey responses mentioned not liking difficult hymns
- The largest number of respondents indicated that there was no element of the service that they considered their "least favorite." 44 (34%)
- For those respondents that did have least favorite items, several items had a high percentage of those responses
- Children's Story\* – Least Favorite Elements – 22 (17.2%). Favorite elements – 33 (25.8%)
- Joyful Noise – Least Favorite Elements – 18 (14.1%). Favorite elements – 74 (57.8%)
- Special Events (bread communion, flower communion, etc.) – Least Favorite Elements 17 (13.3%). Favorite elements – 44 (34.4%)
- In addition to the 11 (8.6%) respondents who indicated that the welcome and greeting was one of their least favorite elements, there was an extreme distaste or anxiety by a number of respondents for the greeting/welcome part of service. These individuals felt strongly about this issue, and provided specific comments including:
  - "I don't like sharing sweaty palms. Can the greeting just be verbal? "
  - "Cut the 'greeting' portion of service (or make it as early as possible in the service and therefore easy to skip)."

- "My husband doesn't like the greeting. He stopped coming"

\* Please Note; we did not explicitly poll the children of our community in the generation of this survey, so their responses are not included in these values.

## **Church Membership**

Our survey revealed that there is a large gap in the number of years that people have been members of the church. 53% of the survey respondents have been members for 10 or more years, while only 17% have been members for 2 to 4 years. We feel that this is a serious matter that requires more attention and investigation into why we do not retain as members those that are new to the church. Latham writes, "We persist in relying on static membership statistics, instead of active attendance as a measure of congregational dynamics. That is, we fail to distinguish between that which might be living and that which might be dying, and the reason for either case. Consequently, we continue to fall for notions that traffic on a one-size-fits-all approach in assessing both programming and ministerial leadership needs . . ." (Page 8).

## **Involvement in Church Programs**

Our survey indicated a desire on the part of many respondents to become further involved in the church. 33 people (41%) wanted to become involved in social justice activities, 21 (26%) in a covenant group, 17 (21%) in a book club, 16 (20%) in *Journey Towards Wholeness*, and 15 (19%) in musical groups.

This could be an indicator that the church (and program ministries) should do a much better job of making it easy for new people, and long-time members, to join various ministries, or it could be a case of attendees just not getting around to being involved.

## **Two Services**

We, like other churches that are undergoing a transformation from pastoral to programmatic, made a decision to establish two services, largely because of size. Latham says that this creates some basic problems and divisions. "Those participating in one of the smaller attended services or programs tend to feel that they are in a pastoral or family congregation, and this feeling, in turn, tends to nurture both the desires and attitudes of this type of congregation." (Page 124)

We feel that this is a key division that is being continued by having two services. Those attending the 9:20 AM service see the church through the lens of a pastoral church. While those attending the 11:20 AM church service are more attuned to the nature of a program church. This can create a fragmented church congregation. Latham goes on to say that two services "may actually be quite different in both content and spirit, having different impact in fostering a different sense of the nature of the experience for those attending." (Page 124). This is a very basic roadblock to the church addressing, and figuring out, what it is going to mean to become a vibrant program church.

As stated earlier, we did not find evidence for the reasons that we were given about why two services were needed.

- The capacity is not so crowded that people feel discouraged in finding a seat.
- An earlier or later service time did not seem to affect most people's service choice.
- We did not find that people needed a more peaceful or contemplative service, or that they did not want to attend a service that contained aspects that were the opposite of peaceful and contemplative.

While some people mentioned that they desire various types of services, this does not seem to be driven by the time that a service is held. It is more related to their emotional state at the time of the service. This may highlight an existing gap that we



can fulfill for congregants and attendees that is not currently met by the two services.

### **Recommendations – Our Growth Opportunity**

A large part of recognizing who we are should include holding one joyous and unifying service every Sunday. The change to one worship service, every week, could occur during the time that Reverend Jacqueline is on her sabbatical, starting in January 2018. We do not feel that it is necessary, or desirable, to wait to bring in a new minister in order to make this change.

We recognize that this could be a controversial decision for some people. Yet, we also think that this is an important and necessary step to take. We feel that Church leadership now has the opportunity to lead our congregation in understanding what it means to be a program church. As we transition from Reverend Duhart to a new minister our members need to be able to discuss and get clear on what it means to be a program church. This includes putting processes in place that enable all of the church's program ministries to function at the highest level.

# Report Appendix

- A. Sunday Worship Survey
- B. Proposal from COSM to board on worship survey
- C. Survey Data
- D. Key Data From Survey
- E. Article: *The 80% Rule: Fact or Fiction?*
- F. Church Facility Seating Capacity
- G. Attendance Graph - 2013-14
- H. Attendance Graph - 2015
- I. Attendance Graph - 2016
- J. Worship Team's Evaluation Form
- K. All Survey "Responses"
- L. COSM presentation at leadership retreat
- M. Church Folly Lane study guide