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**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



Engaging Spirituality: Faith and the Future

Survey Summary Report

*A Report of the
Strategic Visioning Task Force*

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Introduction

The following report provides a brief summary of the key findings and themes of the Strategic Visioning Task Force survey “Engaging Spirituality: Faith and the Future.” The survey is only one piece of a comprehensive assessment of the state of faith for individuals under the age of 40; focus groups, individual interviews, reports, and other materials were collected and reviewed. Each method contributes learnings into the Strategic Visioning Task Force Vision for the Future of the United Church of Christ.

The main question for investigation is as follows: ***What will a transformative church look like in ten years?*** While it is impossible to predict the future, it is indeed possible and appropriate to focus our methodology on individuals who are currently and will continue to *be* the church and church leadership in coming years by focusing on people under 40. Further, because at least 75% of all members and 93% of all authorized ministers of UCC members and ministers are over the age of 40, according to the United Church of Christ’s Center for Analytics, Research and Data (CARD), all of the data collected by CARD to date has focused heavily on this population. In essence, our previous research had created a data/knowledge gap in our understanding of the faith lives of those with whom we focused in this report. Having this new knowledge adds to a fuller picture of our denomination and the people we serve.

With this in mind, the survey was designed by and directed toward individuals under age 40. Survey questions were created, reviewed, and edited by the members of the Strategic Visioning Task Force in consultation with CARD; and the assessment was made available to individuals both within and beyond the UCC so that a comprehensive picture of the faith lives of all individuals was taken into consideration in the visioning process.

Responses were collected from January 4, 2016 to February 15, 2016 via online survey. The survey link was circulated primarily through social media networks of individuals within and beyond the UCC. In total, 3,518 individuals viewed the survey. We received 2,824 valid responses with a 66.6% completion rate. The number of responses to the survey was overwhelming and has provided a rich dataset that warrants deeper analysis than this report can provide at this time. However, overarching results and trends are identified as shown in this report.

For this report, responses were weighted in order to give equal emphasis to four different groups of respondents:

- Regular participants in a spiritual/faith community
- Lapsed members or infrequent participants in a spiritual/faith community
- Individuals disconnected from religious practice, but identified as a person of faith/spirituality
- Individuals disconnected from religious practice, and not interested in faith/spirituality

Providing equal weight to each of these four groups affords the opportunity to better understand the totality of this age population, in order to set the most compelling vision for the UCC relevant to the current context of the U.S. With only a partial understanding of the broader context in which the church is situated, any vision for the UCC in relationship to the wider community is diminished.

Differences between groups, in addition to comparisons with results from previous UCC surveys in which the majority of respondents were over age 40, are provided throughout the report as is appropriate and noteworthy. These comparisons, however, are not the focus of this summary. In general, the purpose of this report is not to provide a statistical overview of the survey but, rather, a thematic overview in which overarching trends are named and explored.

It is our hope that the information will be used in conversation with what we already know in order to understand and better serve the world for the sake of the Gospel.

Results

Personal Beliefs and Practices

In general, young adults do not shy away from talking about their faith or spirituality with people they trust, whether family or friends. They identify themselves to be **highly spiritual**, but not very religious, which is a commonly known characteristic of this particular generation. For young adults, the term “religious” often equates with rituals and practices common to church and, more importantly, membership and participation in a brick-and-mortar church.

High levels of spirituality are related with seeing the divine most through the following ways:

- Music and/or art
- Spending time with friends and family
- Spending time outdoors/in nature
- Serving their communities/helping people directly

Other actions were also frequently selected as ways that young adults connect to God—including worshipping in a faith community, personal/spiritual meditation or body work (yoga, Pilates, etc.), standing up for the rights of others in a quest for justice, and learning and engaging intellectually—but these items were secondary and rated relatively equally. Regular participants in a faith/spiritual community stated that they felt the presence of the divine in worship more frequently than other groups, which makes sense since they are more engaged in congregational life. Other activities that were named as connecting people to the divine included: Dance, sex, mushrooms, and other types of service to the wider/global community.

As a whole, reading holy text(s), spending time in sacred buildings, and spending time in spaces with significant spiritual meaning were not rated to be actions that connected young

adults to the divine. Additionally, a significant portion (about 20%) of respondents articulated that they simply don't feel the presence of the divine or don't believe in the existence of the divine at all. With this generation being the most secular in recent memory, these results are important to note.

Those young adults who do identify as religious are also members of religious communities, and they rely on these communities for **major life rituals such as marriages and baptisms**. While very few young adults rely on memorized prayers or regular scripture reading outside of worship, they are not opposed to ritual in the context of worship, with many welcoming this aspect of congregational life.

As a whole, young adults **do not tend to be dogmatic in any way**. They greatly dislike any community that adheres to specific beliefs and practices or excludes alternative beliefs. A majority do not believe that some religions are truer than others, and they seek out texts and stories from a variety of traditions to enrich their faith. About half of all respondents believe that the teachings of Jesus and biblical texts/stories are an essential part of their faith practice.

Despite a general aversion to dogma, this population **prays/meditates regularly** and often prays for family and friends who are going through rough times or are sick/injured. Related to this, one of the primary concerns to young adults is **the well-being of their communities**. Outreach programs that help others in the community are very important, and they tend to participate in organizations and institutions in which they see an impact being made in the wider community.

Personal experiences and research findings are what young adults rely on most when making important decisions. They also rely on the experiences of family and friends when necessary. Contrary to popular belief, social media is not a trusted source, at least when it comes to decision making. In addition, institutions and holy texts are almost never consulted when young adults are making important decisions.

A majority of young adults **have been to a church building (or synagogue, mosque, temple, etc.)** in the last year for worship, even though some of them are disconnected from religious practice. The second most frequent reason for going to a church building is for a wedding or funeral, followed by attending community/civic meetings, forums, or events. Because young adults are invested in their communities, this is not surprising. When this population is able to give money, they do so most frequently for the purpose of transforming lives and communities.

Because of this, **connection** is incredibly important for young adults. Whether it's working together on issues of importance in the world such as climate change or Black Lives Matter, to sharing a meal with others, to spending an evening in deep conversations, what can be done together is believed to be infinitely better than what one can do alone. Young adults want to be a part of something that gives them meaning and, at the same time, fosters a greater sense of connection to others and the wider community. If one is having fun and laughing as well, that doesn't hurt.

In reality, however, young adults have a **great deal of challenges** and worries weighing on them. From larger social issues such as global war and terror, climate change, systemic racism, sexism, homophobia and other justice issues, they also worry about finances and debt, demanding yet inadequate employment, their families, their health, and the very personal realities of facing prejudice and hatred in their daily lives. Overall, they worry about the future—what kind of world will they be living in over the next decade, or the next five decades?—and whether their lives have value and meaning. The world young adults are living in and inheriting is one unlike any other in history; and this is felt deeply and apprehensively.

This is a main reason why young adults feel a sense of urgency to work toward **changing their communities and the world for the better**. In ten years, they want to live in a world of peace and equality for all, where people come together in community to make things better. They desire a world where black and brown lives are safe and valued, LGBTQIA people have equal rights, poverty and income inequality are eliminated, and the dignity of all is established. With regard to church and religion, they want a world free of violence due on one's religion; and they **desire the church and its institutions to lead the way in caring for the least of these in society rather than focusing on self-preservation**. The theme of connection and working toward the equality, health, and safety of all is clearly a primary value for this generation.

Church/Faith/Spiritual Community

Young adults envision the following attributes as most important for any church/faith/spiritual community:

- Is fully inclusive of people from diverse backgrounds (LGBTQ, race/ethnicity, language, ability, gender, immigration status, etc.)
- Encourages people to think for themselves
- Serves the poor and/or oppressed
- Works against systems of oppression for justice for all
- Fosters an environment for making meaningful relationships

Also important to young adults, but rated slightly lower in terms of importance, includes offering a safe space or refuge for people in crisis, provides a place of comfort, stretches to accommodate accessibility needs, fosters connections in the wider community, and fosters personal transformation. Among all of these items, the broader themes of **inclusion/welcome, social justice, service to community, connection/relationships, and independent thinking/questioning** are present. Young people want places where they not only feel safe and fully included, but also where others feel safe and fully included. They desire a faith community that is not focused on internal governance or management, but whose **mission and purpose is a lived phenomenon**. This is not to say that young adults don't realize that governance and internal management are necessary; they just desire to re-structure the pre-established ways of going about these activities in order to place priority on connection and impact.

To further illustrate this point, surveyed young adults rated the following elements as not very important to a faith community: Having a building, preparing for the afterlife, and adhering to the same beliefs and doctrines. For this population, a building does not a church make. A faith community is truly a community, and the logistics of whether a building exists or not is a detail of little concern. This same pattern follows for whether or not a faith community has attractive programs for young adults or their children. As one respondent articulated, “If people are searching for attractive music and art programs, they will find specific music and art programs in the community.” Another individual said, “People—not programs—for my children are more important.” Additionally, freedom for thinking and questioning belief is expressed again with young adults placing minimal importance on adhering to particular beliefs or doctrines.

At its very best, not surprisingly, young adults envision a faith community that is **authentic, supportive, connective, meaningful, diverse, and fully inclusive and welcoming**. They desire a community that “emphasizes participation, not perfection” and “is the hands and feet of Jesus to one another and the world around them.” It is important to note that the level of connection that they are seeking is not a surface type of connection but is a sense of community that fosters accountability, vulnerability, and a nurturing of one another’s faith. Many young adults articulated that they want **deep engagement in spiritual practices** like prayer, worship, fellowship, and reading scripture, all in the active pursuit of God’s calling in their lives and as a community. Along with this, **theological depth** is important to this group; yet they desire a theology that is open enough to hold their values and understandings of the world.

Of most importance to this population is how a faith community reflects caring for the wellbeing of humans in the world and prevents harm, in addition to how the community lives out and teaches ideas of justice, rights, and individual autonomy. Previous generations may have placed greater emphasis on respecting traditions and following the rules established by a community, but that is not the case for younger generations. It is frustrating and disappointing for young adults when faith communities follow outdated or irrelevant traditions and practices. If those traditions have meanings that weather the test of time, then they are not opposed to carrying forward that legacy; but tradition for the sake of tradition is not of importance to them.

Interestingly, young adults do not place a great deal of importance on whether or not there are other people their age with whom they can relate in any particular faith community. In general, **young adults are able to find networks of people their age in other ways**. What is more noteworthy, however, is that greater percentages of young adults of color who completed the survey indicated being more frustrated that there are no people of their particular racial/ethnic background with whom they can relate in their faith communities. Likewise, people who identified beyond the gender binary and/or as non-heterosexual indicated more frustration that there are no people of their particular gender identity or sexual identity with whom they can relate. This is important especially as it relates to young adults’ desires for equality and inclusion.

Contrary to some perceptions, young adults contribute in meaningful ways to their faith communities; and if they are not a part of a community of faith, many of them still envision themselves contributing in the future. Of course, some individuals articulated that they are unsure of the ways in which they might contribute to such communities, which is expected of those not as connected with a faith community. But as expected, community service, outreach, social justice advocacy, and a general giving of time, talents, and dollars are the most frequently named ways for participation by a majority of young adults. In addition, and perhaps more importantly, many named their **leadership gifts and talents as ways they are currently participating in faith communities**. A percentage of young adults completing the survey are authorized ministers, and their contributions as leaders in the church today, whether or not they are UCC, cannot be underestimated. Other contributions mentioned included teaching, artistic talents, technology support, and being a general participant in the life of the faith community.

Church/Faith/Spiritual Leadership

First and foremost, people under 40 **want a leader who inspires them to be a better person**. They also trust leaders they know personally, leaders who have spoken out and taken action in the name of justice or peace, and leaders who have proven their abilities and have a record of doing well. Even though social media/the internet plays a role in many younger people's lives, they do not use it as a means for vetting leaders; neither do they trust leaders just because they hold prominent positions within institutions. Because young adults are not seeking to invest in the maintenance of an institution for its own sake, it stands to reason that their trust in leaders of institutions is quite minimal. Other attributes of leaders that were named included honesty/authenticity, integrity, and kindness.

In terms of preparation for leadership, **affirmation from the community in which one leads** is the best preparation method selected by young adults. They also indicated that a degree or an apprenticeship program are also strong methods for learning leadership. Not surprisingly, a strong call from God is one of the preparation factors most selected by young adult clergy and regular participants of faith communities. Other methods named included direct experience and just having a passion for the community to which one is called.

National/Global Issues

As already indicated, young adults care deeply about the world in which they live and seek to affect change on a number of levels. They see the ways that many institutions have failed to bring about change, but still bring a sense of hope that they can cultivate and participate in systems that will make a positive difference. The issues that will impact most greatly the world in the next ten years, as named by young adults, are:

- Climate change/environmental justice
- Racial justice
- Income inequality

- Immigration reform and immigration rights
- Mental issues and awareness
- Religious intolerance/violence

Though not selected as frequently as the above items, other issues that young adults believe will impact the world in the next ten years are LGBTQ rights, mass incarceration and criminal justice reform, excessive use of force/militarization of police forces, and women's rights/gender equality. Some also named gun violence/control, terrorism, drugs, and access to clean water as pressing issues in the present and future.

People under 40 described **myriad ways that the church can work to address these issues in coming years**, some of which include prayer, legislative action, activism, partnerships with organizations already working on these issues, building awareness/education, training, speaking out, providing a welcoming, safe space and leading by example. Some respondents articulated that any organization can work to address these issues; as the church, it is important to engage in **addressing systemic issues through our faith, providing theological and spiritual foundations for this work**.

Organizations to which many young adults are committed include Black Lives Matter, Planned Parenthood, Heifer Project, Habitat for Humanity, Amnesty International, Humane Society, and various other local, national, and international organizations. In short, **passion and action for others and for the wider world is a distinctive part of the character of younger generations**.

Conclusion

Each of the overarching themes from the survey results provides keys to shaping the vision of the United Church of Christ in coming years. Moreover, they highlight the tensions between the already and the not yet, between the ways church is and the ways church will be, between Church 2.0 and Church 3.0. Rather than envisioning these solely as tensions, they are opportunities for charting a way into the future. Using some of the main themes of this report, below are a few questions to prompt generative visioning:

- In what ways might the church move beyond its understanding as a brick-and-mortar space into being a mission-driven organization?
- Are the ways that young adults connect with God/the divine legitimized and incorporated into our ways of doing and being church?
- How does the UCC embody elements of community that are important to young adults such as connection, authenticity, vulnerability, safe space, and full inclusion/welcome?
- How might the personal experiences, leadership, and wisdom of young adults be acknowledged, legitimized, and incorporated into the whole life of the church?
- How might faith be practiced differently to meet the needs, as well as consider the values, of younger generations, particularly by de-emphasizing dogma and emphasizing independent thinking and questioning?

- How is the UCC working to address the national and global issues that young adults believe will impact the world greatly in the coming decade?
- Is church as a personally and communally transformative movement possible?

Appendix: Demographics

One of the challenges of this survey was the collection of a diverse cross-section of the young adult population. In this regard, more women completed the survey than men; and a vast majority of respondents identified as White/Euro-American. To account for this sample imbalance, comparisons by these two groupings were analyzed to identify significant differences. By and large, there were no significant differences in responses for these demographic categories, except where indicated in the report.

Relatively proportional samples were obtained for the following demographics: Age, sexual identity, clergy/laity, UCC/non-UCC, and relationship status. Educational demographics skewed toward individuals with bachelor and graduate degrees, and a majority of young adults were employed and working full-time. Both education and employment status are not representative of the general young adult population, so this should be taken into consideration when reviewing survey results. Sexual identity demographics were abundantly representative, with roughly 30% of all respondents identifying as non-heterosexual.

Other demographic items collected were U.S. region and household income. Unfortunately, differences between groups for all demographic categories were not analyzed due to the size and scope of the dataset and the timeline of the strategic visioning process. This dataset will be shared with other religious researchers who will have opportunities to analyze more closely certain demographic items in relationship to survey responses.