

# Helping Our Communities Thrive: Meet the Moment Wave Cohort for UUA's Congregational Life Work

*Executive Summary by Rev. Dr. Megan L. Foley, December 2025*

This study gathered insights from Unitarian Universalist congregational leaders, UUA staff, and external partners to understand what helps UU communities flourish—and what role the UUA can play in that flourishing. Conversations were held via Zoom in late summer and early fall of 2025 using both small-group discussions and recorded sessions. The findings point clearly to an encouraging truth: **the UUA already offers most of what congregations say they need.** The challenge is not a lack of resources, but **a lack of clear, consistent communication and trust.**

## What Congregational Flourishing Looks Like

Across all groups, people could easily imagine thriving communities. Shared themes included:

- **Vibrant energy and engagement**—a sense of “buzz,” momentum, and ways for everyone to participate.
- **A multigenerational community** with strong presence of children, youth, and families.
- **Congregations as community hubs**—active in justice, partnership, and public presence.
- **Healthy relationships and clarity of mission**—named more often by UUA staff, who see the need for these underlying dynamics daily.

Leaders long for joyful leadership, stability, and a congregational culture that feels connected, energized, and grounded in purpose.

## What Congregations Say They Need

When asked what UUA actions would most help, congregational leaders overwhelmingly named things the UUA already provides:

- **Trainings and workshops** on all aspects of congregational life—practical, accessible, and not overwhelming.
- **Opportunities to connect with other congregations.**
- **Plug-and-play outreach resources** that are easy to adopt.
- **Guidance for navigating current rising authoritarianism** and responding faithfully to the present moment.

Requests for entirely new programs were rare. Instead, leaders often simply don't know what exists, how to find it, or how to translate what exists into what they need.

## **The Core Issue: Communication & Trust**

The study highlights a persistent gap:

**The UUA diligently creates resources, while congregations struggle to find or recognize them.**

This gap is reinforced by:

- Reliance in the Congregational Life staff group on one-to-one staff/congregational leader relationships that must be rebuilt with each leadership and staff person's turnover.
- Overwhelming depth and volume of materials that exceed the practical capacity of volunteer leaders to engage with.
- Longstanding mistrust and uneven relationships between congregations and the UUA.

The result is a painful “already-and-not-yet”: the supportive future congregations hope for already exists in many ways—yet remains out of reach.

## **Recommendations**

1. **Stop assuming more resources are needed.** Focus instead on sharing and organizing what already exists.
2. **Create a clear, consistent, achievable core set of offerings** that every UUA staff person refers to—such as board training, start-up support, conflict assistance, and leader connections.
3. **Deliver expertise in “top three things to know” formats** or similar, reducing overwhelm and raising confidence.
4. **Communicate these offerings relentlessly.** Repeat them so consistently that any connected UU leader can name them.

## **Conclusion**

This study brings hopeful news: the UUA is not off track. Staff have created strong, relevant, and thoughtful support for congregations. What's needed now is not more content, but **better communication and re-built trust** so these supports are seen and used. By shifting priorities toward clarity, consistency, and relational repair, the UUA can more visibly fulfill its mission of accompanying congregations as they live our faith in the world.

## Appendix A: High Frequency Responses to Questions

### Question 1: What Does Flourishing Look Like?

#### From the Field:

Many opportunities for connection and involvement/deepening onramps for engagement

- Number of respondents: 7 – Percentage of their group: 50%
- 10- 75%
- 4- 30%
- 4 – 80%

Connection to each other as a community

- Number of respondents: 4 – Percentage of their group: 80%

Justice work in the community/community partner/community hub open to many outside groups and people/

- Number of respondents: 13 - Percentage of their group: 87%
- 5 – 40%
- 5 – 40%
- 2 – 40%
- 3 – 75%

Leadership feels joyful/not stressful/no scarcity of leaders because everyone is fulfilled and motivated

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of their group 20%
- 3 – 60%

High energy/joy to be there/vibes

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of their group: 30%
- 3 – 25%
- 4 – 80%
- 2 – 50%

High functioning minister/staff

- Number of respondents: 7- Percentage of their group: 50%

Financially stable

- Number of respondents: 4 – Percentage of their group: 30%
- 3 – 20%
- 3 – 60%

True multiculturalism/diversity all around

- Number of respondents: 4- Percentage of the particular group: 30%
- 3 – 25%

#### Multigenerational/Kids and family present/RE

- Number of respondents: 5 – Percentage of the particular group: 30%
- 4 – 33%
- 4 – 33%
- 2 – 40%
- 3 – 75%

#### Longtime members make space for new leadership

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of the particular group: 30%
- 3- 20%

#### New member engagement

- 5 – 33%

#### Growth

- 4 – 25%

#### Conflict Skills/covenant/trust building

- 4 – 33%

#### From UUA Staff:

#### Lots of ways to connect/connections within community

- Number of respondents: 10 - percentage of their group: 38%
- 6 – 50%

#### Member support of each other

- Number of respondents: 10- Percentage of their group: 38%
- 7 – 59%

#### Mission focused

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of their group: 30%
- 2 – 40%
- 10 -38%

#### Conflict/ Trust building/appropriate relationships/boundaries/path to restoration of relationship

- Number of respondents: 6 – Percentage of their group: 60%
- 7 – 30%

### Vibes/energy/buzz/joy

- Number of respondents: 2 – Percentage of their group: 20%
- 4 – 80%
- 8 – 30%
- 3 – 25%

### Vibrant spiritual life/worship/ritual

- Number of respondents: 4 – Percentage of their group: 40%
- 3 – 30%

### Diversity on many levels

- Number of respondents: 7 – Percentage of their group: 30%
- 3 – 25%

### Open to change/Rightsizing

- 5 – 19%

### People excited to work for church/no burnout

- 6 – 23%
- 5 – 42%

### Good welcome for new members

- 6 – 23%

### Multigenerational

- 4 – 15%
- 6 – 50%

### *Question 2: Moves Needed to Get There*

#### From the Field:

### Financial generosity/legacy planning

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of their group: 25%

### Outreach to community for new members

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of their group: 25%
- 4 – 26%
- 2 – 40%

### Robust leadership trainings, including in person

- 3 – 20%

### Have more diversity

- 3 – 20%

### Innovation

- 3 – 20%
- 2 – 40%

### Radical/preemptive<sup>1</sup> welcome to newcomers

- 3 – 20%
- 2 – 40%

### Partnering with community

- 7 – 58%

### Healthy boundaries/behavior

- 2 – 40%

### Creation of fellowship building activities including work for the church

- 2 – 40%

### From UUA Staff:

### Relationship building/conflict management

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of their group: 30%
- 2 – 40%
- 5- 19%
- 3 – 25%

### Small groups

- 2 – 20%

### Spiritual practice training

- 2 – 20%

### Mission discernment

- 2 – 20%
- 7 – 27%

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<sup>1</sup> Preemptive radical welcome is a term used by CB Beal to mean a welcoming environment for folks who are not yet present.

### Self-reflection

- 6 – 23%

### Experimentation in offerings/culture of 'yes'/innovation

- 6 – 23%

### Right sizing/change management

- 3 – 25%

### *Question 3: What Can the UUA Do?*

#### From the Field:

#### Trainings for leaders

- Number of respondents: 2 – Percentage of their group: 16%
- 3 – 20%
- 1 – 25%
- 3 – 75%

#### Connect with regional staff for help

- Number of respondents: 3 – Percentage of their group: 25%
- 1 – 25%

#### Connection and help regarding current events/political landscape

- 2 – 16%

#### Help with outreach/publicity/growth

- Number of respondents: 2 – Percentage of their group: 16%
- 7 – 46%
- 3 – 60%

#### Create opportunities for connection with other congregations

- 6 – 40%

#### Unified events calendar of all UU events

- 2 – 40%

#### Theological education

- 2 – 40%

From UUA Staff:

Training/resources

- Number of respondents: 10 – Percentage of their group: 100%

Create leader/congregational connections with each other

- 6 - 22%
- 5 – 42%

Boundaries/conflict/covenant work

- 3 – 11%

Better delivery of what we already have

- 3 – 11%

Share trends several times a year

- 3 – 11%

Share innovations we see

1. 3 – 11%

Maintain relationship with congregations

- 3 – 11%

Right size ourselves to mission alignment

- 3 – 25%

## Appendix B: Answers to What UUA Can Do to Help

Field leaders said:

“Special Invite”<sup>2</sup> leaders:

Trainings for leaders	2
Hold Hotchkiss workshop after a common read	
Connect with regional staff for help	3
Hope for Us/conflict management	
sexual misconduct resources	
help with capital campaigns	
Connection and help regarding the current events	2
Board retreat guide	
mission writing workshop	
fewer words, it's a firehose	
Growth and outreach help	2
Lawyer recommendations for legacy planning, social justice work	

Lay Leaders (general):

Resources on evangelizing/describing Uuism/promotional materials/social media materials to use	7
Trainings on everything, with practical steps that don't feel scary	3
Opportunities for collaboration between congregations	6
UUA can collect info on who actually joins our congregations to share	
Storytelling about concrete successes and learnings	
Train the trainer model to expand in person, local training opportunities	
UUA-led follow up actions after trainings	
Grants from the UUA	
List of consultants	
Build trust in the UUA through the ministerial search process	
Leadership recruitment	
Stewardship help	
Policy samples, best practices	
Hold events open to wider community as well	
Share UUA information with congregations/"decentralize"	
Incentivize longer ministerial commitments	
Simplify use of UUA resources	
Wave Cohort for smaller congregations	
Visit each congregation in person annually, in person	
Conflict support	

<sup>2</sup> “Special Invite” leaders were leaders who have already worked extensively with CL staff in the manner we currently provide support.

Simplify search process/maybe assign ministers?	
Learning circle on membership growth	
Shared values curricula and worship materials	
Guest minister list	

### Centering Marginalized Voices:

Be more countercultural
Lean into our weaknesses and let them strengthen us
Deeper spirituality
Guidance on creating 'informal tech hubs' like how to set up a watch space for UUA offerings
Classes on tech and online spaces, canva, creating intersectional antioppressive spaces
More anti oppression training
Use more accessible language (e.g. not 'plurality', 'interdependence')
More cohort gatherings like this one
Programming for people to practice being uncomfortable
Empower folks holding marginalized identities as leaders
Create opportunities for nontraditional ministries
UUA workshop for congregations on flourishing, based on this data
Help evaluate congregations and give them a road map for change
Spanish language materials
Adult education for anti oppression
Help finding a building

### Religious Professionals:

Help congregations find each other for partnering, including sharing staff	
More plug and play communications content	3
Unified events calendar so it can be easily referenced	2
Theological education	2
Youth and young adult programming	
More ministers	
Template for shared worship services	
Training for nominating teams/leadership recruitment and development	
Boundaries training	
Sitemap to uua.org, org chart for staff	
Support for non fellowshiped ministers or different ministers	

Survey respondents<sup>3</sup>:

Teach value of multigenerational community
Teach experimentation
Regional staff serve as coaches
Document and share best practices, what is working across congregations
Start up workshops
Interventions
Trainings
Guest preaching
Workshops
Welcoming Skills

UUA Staff said:

CL Leadership Team:

educational resources to help learn UUism/ congregational processes/leadership development	ALL
<i>Including:</i>	
<i>change management and tolerance</i>	
<i>Missional realigning</i>	
<i>strategic planning</i>	
<i>staffing analysis</i>	
<i>visitor to leader pipeline</i>	
<i>evaluation and revisions of programs</i>	
<i>adult spiritual development</i>	
<i>UUA sponsored credentialing for lay leaders</i>	2
<i>train RPs to be coaches, not service delivery</i>	
<i>religious orders outside congregations</i>	
Consultants to help keep the faith/tune up	
Ways to communicate/learn from other congregations and leaders	
model promise keeping	
denominational affairs program	
have staff looking for fresh leadership	

Newer CL staff:

UUA models accountability work	
UUA uses leverage points of staff transitions and board support	

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<sup>3</sup> Participants who could not make a live meeting were offered a survey option.

<i>for ex. Start ups for all kinds of staff</i>
Better UUA outreach systems so we're in touch
Develop a tool to help folks hear each other across generations
Develop a tool for eldering - rituals
Give permission for them to let go and rediscover their agency
Model how to do things
Fund innovations and other forms of faith than congregations

All CL staff:

Create leader and congregational meet ups	3
Expose them to different worship modes	2
Create opportunities for learning and practice:	
<i>mission development</i>	
<i>listening well</i>	
<i>facilitation skills</i>	
<i>boundaries/covenant/conflict</i>	3
<i>justice/inclusion/beloved community</i>	
<i>pastoral care</i>	
<i>start ups</i>	
<i>change tolerance/letting go</i>	
<i>new staffing models</i>	
Listening circles to see what's needed	
Better delivery of what we already have	3
Share trends faith wide 1-2x/year, stories of change/risk/innovation	3
Fund innovation in Uuism	
Have UUA staff share and model innovation they see	3
toolkits and resources	
Don't mediate every conflict:	
contact early for resources	
pay a local person to help	
Staying in relationship	3
4 Cs:	
<i>coach</i>	
<i>connect</i>	3
<i>companion</i>	
<i>challenge</i>	
Support for staff	
Encourage the congregations to self-organize	

All UUA Staff (non CL):

Right size OURSELVES - to mission alignment	3
Practice and model conflict engagement	
Trust building	
Lesson distance from regionalization	
Stewardship resources	2
Connect congregations to each other to create programming, cast a vision	5
Create easy on ramps for UUness	
Training on right sizing	2
Faith development	
Simplify	
Shared values and rituals	
Plug and play resources all around:	
<i>trainings</i>	
<i>publicity</i>	
<i>safety</i>	
<i>Stewardship resources</i>	
<i>covenant</i>	
<i>graphics</i>	
<i>worship material</i>	
<i>activities</i>	
<i>prompts</i>	
<i>rituals</i>	
Helping people survive these times	