

Next Steps Weekend Report for the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato



I. Introduction

The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato Minnesota (UUFM) engaged me, Rachel Maxwell, a Unitarian Universalist Stewardship Consultant and member of the Stewardship for Us team, to conduct a *Next Steps Weekend* to provide a workshop and recommendations for building engagement and generosity. This *Next Steps Weekend* was conducted from September 30 to October 2, 2022.

It is important to note the context in which this Next Steps Weekend was conducted. During the past two+ years, we have been living through unprecedented times. In Fall of 2022, when this the Next Steps Weekend was conducted, our country and much of the world had been living with a global pandemic for over two years. Many months were spent under shelter-in-place orders, with illness and death from the COVID 19 pandemic all around. In early January of 2021, after a contentious presidential election, our country experienced an unprecedented insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Not being able to gather together for much of the pandemic has been a serious difficulty for congregations and UU Fellowship of Mankato is no exception. In March of 2020 congregations were called upon to pivot to remote services often within less than a week. The stresses of this

time have been felt by Ministers, Staff, Lay Leaders, Members and Friends. Many are truly exhausted by the efforts to hold the congregation and themselves together.

The introduction of vaccines in January of 2021 provided some relief, and after some time Mankato along with many other congregations began to convene again although sometimes sporadically and many not until 2022. Returning to the facility brings its own difficulties and stresses as congregations struggle to set themselves up to be able to be truly multi-channel to re-engage their congregations and to figure out how to provide both onsite and remote opportunities all. Many congregants have remained home, staying away for health and safety reasons or have simply lost the habit of coming to church. Staff and members who remained active as leaders during this time are exhausted.

II. Basic Data on the Congregation

Name and Mailing Address of Congregation	Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato 937 Charles Ave Mankato, MN 56001 (507) 388-5022
Website Address	https://uumankato.com/
Minister	Rev. Rita Capezzi
Lay Leader Point of Contact	Bob Finley, President
Number of Members	114
Annual Financial Commitments for 2022/23	\$150,300
Average Household Financial Commitment	\$2,312 from 64 households
Median Household Financial Commitment	\$1,500
Current Operating Budget	\$228,350
Mortgage or other Debt	~\$60,000
Cash and Reserves	~370,000
Endowment	\$0

Mission and Vision Statements:

We are a welcoming people of diverse beliefs who commit to
nourish the spirit, broaden the mind, nurture the earth and
build community.
Love Beyond Belief

III. Objectives and Scope of the Next Steps Weekend

The purpose of a Next Steps Weekend is to provide your congregation with an objective eye to identify strengths, opportunities, and areas needing improvement in light of the congregation's stated goal of building engagement and generosity.

Prior to the on-site visit, I received and reviewed substantial material, including information on:

- finances,
- membership,
- programs,

- annual giving,
- past capital campaigns,
- staffing,
- congregational history,
- by-laws,
- annual reports,
- newsletters, and
- your web site.

I also had email exchanges and/or telephone conversations in advance of the visit or after the visit with:

- Bob Finley, Board President
- Liz Kipp, Treasurer
- Rev. Rita Capezzi, Minister
- Rev. Lisa Presley, MidAmerica Region Congregational Life Consultant and Primary contact for UU Fellowship of Mankato

IV. Impressions, Commendations and Observations

During the weekend of September 30 to October 2, 2022 I met with your Minister, Board of Trustees, and various church groups to gather information in person about your congregation and its programs and to provide information about congregational finances, giving and generosity. I conducted a workshop on Saturday afternoon focused on the question “What do we do now?”. In total, I met with 17 different people during the meetings and 16 people attended the workshop Saturday October 1st. On Sunday during the service, I delivered a presentation and my recommendations to the congregation. I have included the slide deck from the presentation with this report. A full schedule for the weekend is included in Appendix A.

You, like so many other congregations, are reeling from being closed for so long and your members acutely feel the anxieties of the times. You are worried that “no one” is showing up for church, that you aren’t growing and that you’ve found it difficult to recruit volunteers. Leaders are heavily feeling the strains of the times and feel need to see what or who comes next.

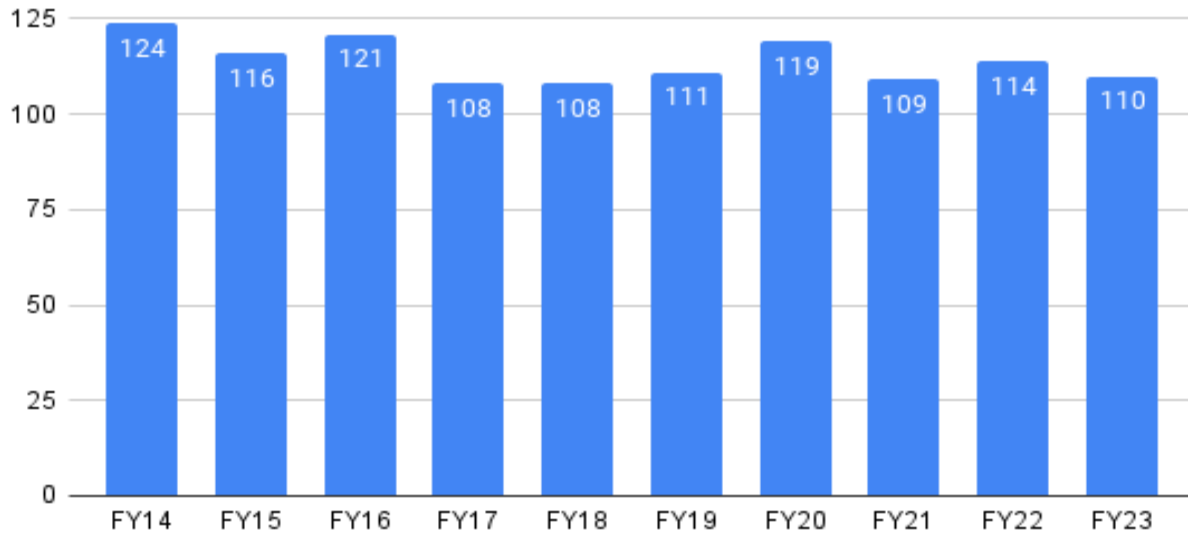
People I spoke with during the weekend shared their experiences of the importance of your congregation and community in their lives and in the life of the larger community. People found a vital spiritual home for themselves at UUFM -- a place where they enjoy a meal together, and often join together in the spirit-work of creating a just world. I experienced little internal anxiety about your Minister or the leadership.

Membership

Your membership looks quite stable although it has shown some slight decline over the past decade. It’s worth noting that your drop in numbers is significantly less than the overall trend in the United States. Between 2010 and 2020 church membership in the USA dropped 23 overall. Your membership has seen about a 10% decline in the past 10 years.

Growing a church membership (especially in these times) is a challenging prospect and must be conducted by growing your mission and visibility in the outer community. People join churches for a variety of reasons but they’re generally seeking something – often with UU churches, and especially today, they’re seeking a liberal spiritual home and a community of like-minded souls so they will not feel alone. I often hear people joined because they wanted a moral and ethical

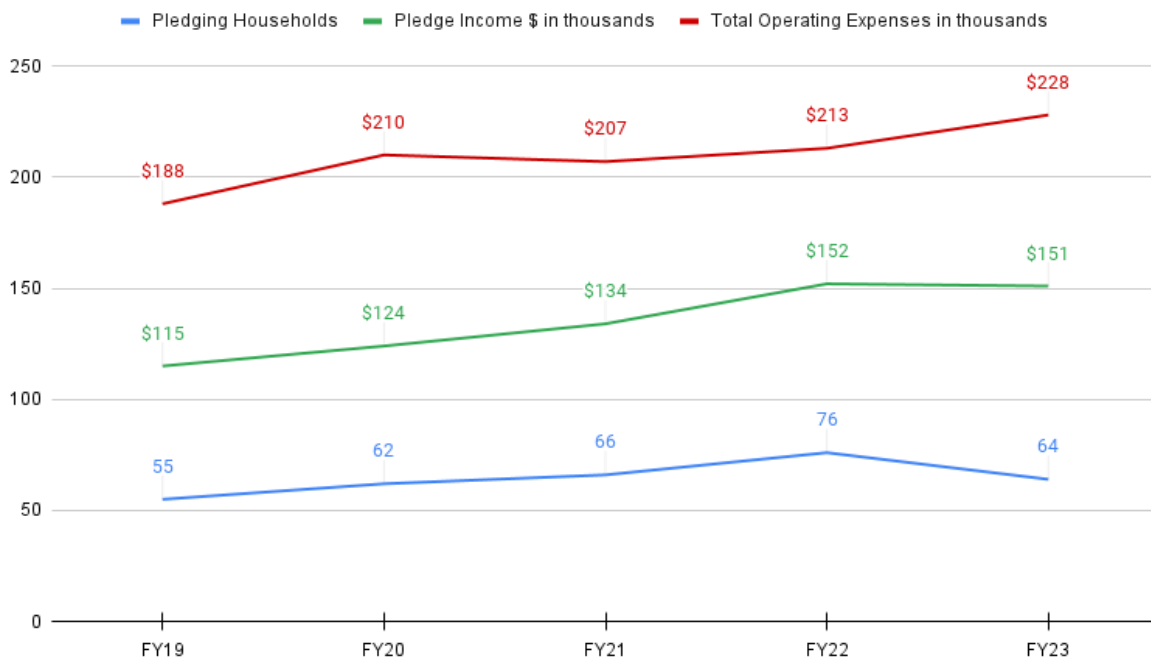
home base and a community to, together, do the work of raising their children and of making the change they seek in the world.



Finances

Your average and median pledges look good although there is still room for improvement. You have consistent, moderately growing giving over the past five years. Your number of pledging households has dropped significantly in this last year – the third year of pandemic pledging. This hasn’t had a strong effect on overall giving, indicating it may simply be that the least committed households dropped out at this time.

Your reserves look healthy and you hold a strong asset in your rental property. You have recently received two significant gifts and a bequest that you have used to maintain your spending but you are rightly concerned that this deficit budgeting is not sustainable for more than a few years. You’ve now created an endowment fund policy so you can do work toward educating people in the congregation about making a bequest.



Survey

36 people responded to a brief online survey asking respondents to identify strengths, challenges, and priorities for UUFM. (see full results in Appendix B)

The survey indicated your greatest strength lies in your welcoming and inclusive atmosphere and your minister and staff. You also feel Sunday Services, your Social Justice Programs, and activism are strong and that the community is among your greatest strengths.

When asked to identify your top three challenges, over 80% of respondents indicated your membership growth was a challenge.

Congregational engagement and membership growth were the top priorities for furthering your mission going forward, followed closely by finances, and social justice work.

Full results of the survey can be found attached to this report.

Blessings

- Shared values and commitment to *Love beyond Belief*.
- Well-earned reputation for inclusiveness and welcome
- Wonderful talented Minister you appreciate
- Welcoming and accessible facility filled with art
- Reserves and assets to give you time

Challenges

- Recruiting leadership for all you need and want to do
- Unsustainable deficit budget
- Overall energy and sense of purpose are low
- Families and others slow to return on Sunday mornings
- Global pandemic still happening!!

Conclusion

Your congregation appears reasonably healthy internally and financially. You have challenges around engagement, and you're concerned that people are not showing up on Sundays but these may be more indications of our times rather than your congregation's specific weaknesses. Your congregation is managing the financially difficult terrain of recently transitioning to full time ministry while being hit by a global pandemic that shut your doors and much of your programming for quite some time.

V. Recommendations for Next Steps

1. Articulate what your role is now in the larger Mankato community.
2. Think outside the box about how you might engage people in who you are and what you have and do here.
3. Develop a strategic and financial plan for the next five years. *How* will you engage people and increase giving?

4. Try some easy and simple new things using the assets you already have.

RECOMMENDATION #1

Articulate what your role is now in the larger Mankato community.

I often think that it may be inaccurate to use the words coming back or going back – we are all going forward into a new era and new realities as we carry with us new individual and collective traumas from our experiences over the past several years.

This is a new time and requires that you look at who you are and want to be in the greater community in this new era. This may involve another gathering akin to the workshop I did on Saturday asking the questions:

- Who are we called to be now?
- What can we do to answer that call?

Give people paper and pens and five minutes to write down their answers to the questions before sharing them with the group. Have the leader write the different answers on large sheets so everyone can see. Take one question at a time.

Have people vote on what they'd like to see happen most by giving everyone three sticky dots and have them place them on their favorites.

At the end of the session take the top three (or more if you have time) initiatives and, with the group, identify Who, When, and How for each initiative. The Who should be more than one leader for each thing, When can be a month or a season, and How can be determined later if necessary.

RECOMMENDATION #2

Think outside the box about how you might engage people in who you are and what you have and do here.

This recommendation was beautifully answered in one way by an idea that came up in the Saturday workshop, UU 7 principles bombing the city by simply posting the principles throughout the city on pieces of paper, along with the UUFM website.

Perhaps bring a small group of particularly creative folk together to think of other ways for you to spread the good word of your existence.

RECOMMENDATION #3

Develop a strategic and financial plan for the next five years. *How will you engage people and increase giving?*

Create a five-year financial plan demonstrating the necessary resources to carry out your plans. I've attached a useful financial planning tool for developing a strategic five-year financial plan. This includes making membership, giving, staffing, and capital needs predictions for your future.

In the attached Strategic Financial Plan Template, feel free to edit, delete or create more lines or tabs. This is simply one way to understand what's called for. Use it as it is most useful to you. The template is a tool intended to provoke thinking about your needs over time—both annual and capital. What staffing will you need in five years? What do you think your average annual pledge will be?

As you consider increased membership you need to couple that with the How. How will you find new members? What will you do differently?

RECOMMENDATION #4**Try some easy and simple new things using the assets you already have.**

There were several good ideas that came forward in the Saturday workshop and more can be developed if you host another, similar event as described above. Here are the ideas from Saturday (see more complete results in Appendix C):

- Make being liberal cool!
- 7 principles-bomb Mankato – post the principles with your website in bathrooms and on bulletin boards all over the city!
- Develop small groups that parents and families want to join.
- Share the stories of what you do as individuals with each other – on your webpage and social media – include pics
- Partner with local organizations or faith communities to host talks relevant to young families and others who need to find UUFM
- Share your offering plate with local orgs
- Develop programs for families – after school and daytime for homeschooling families.
- Rent/provide space to a preschool or day care

Please let me know if you have questions about anything in this report. It was a pleasure to be among you! I am grateful for the chance to help by providing my reflections and recommendations on your challenges and opportunities for you are beautiful! I hope I will be able to serve you in the future.

With my gratitude for all you do.

Kind regards,



Rachel Maxwell
Stewardship Consultant, Stewardship for Us
425.231.8313
www.stewardshipforus.com

attachments:

- Strategic Financial Plan Template for Congregations S4Us
- Survey Results – visual and spreadsheet
- NSW Presentation

APPENDIX A

Next Steps Weekend Agenda Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Mankato

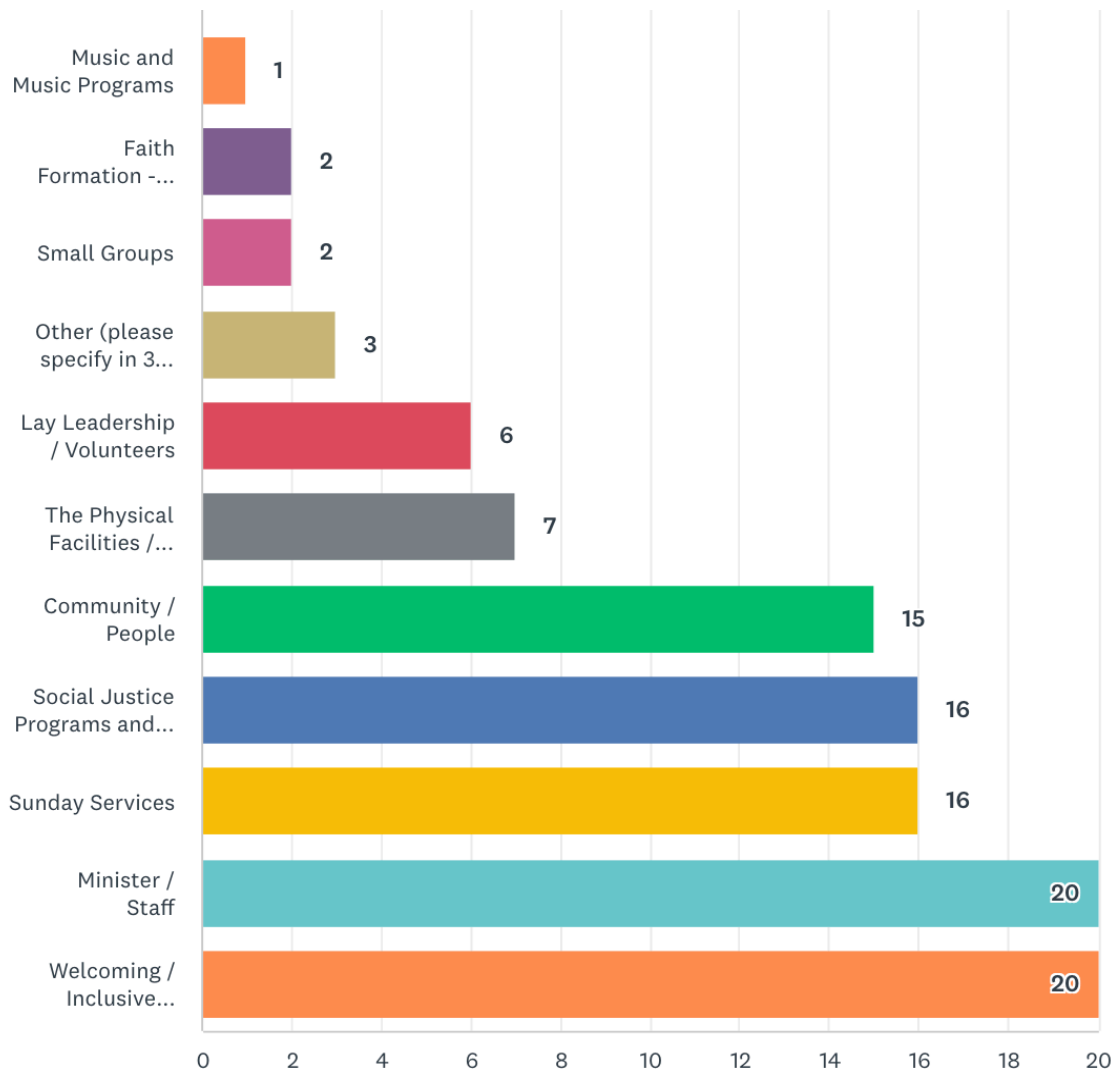
Friday, Sept 30, 2022	
6:00 PM	Meeting with Minister Rita Capezzi
7:00 PM	Meeting with Board
Saturday, October 1, 2022	
9:00 AM	Meeting with Finance
10:00 AM	Meeting with Committee on Shared Ministry (CSM)
11:00 AM	Meeting with Education & Justice (Edj)
12:00 PM	Children's Faith Development (CFD)
1:00 PM	Catered lunch
2:00 PM - 4PM	Workshop
Sunday, October 2, 2022	
10:30 AM	Sunday Service including Rachel's presentation with Q&A
11:45 AM	Fellowship Luncheon

APPENDIX B

Survey Results

36 Participants in the Survey

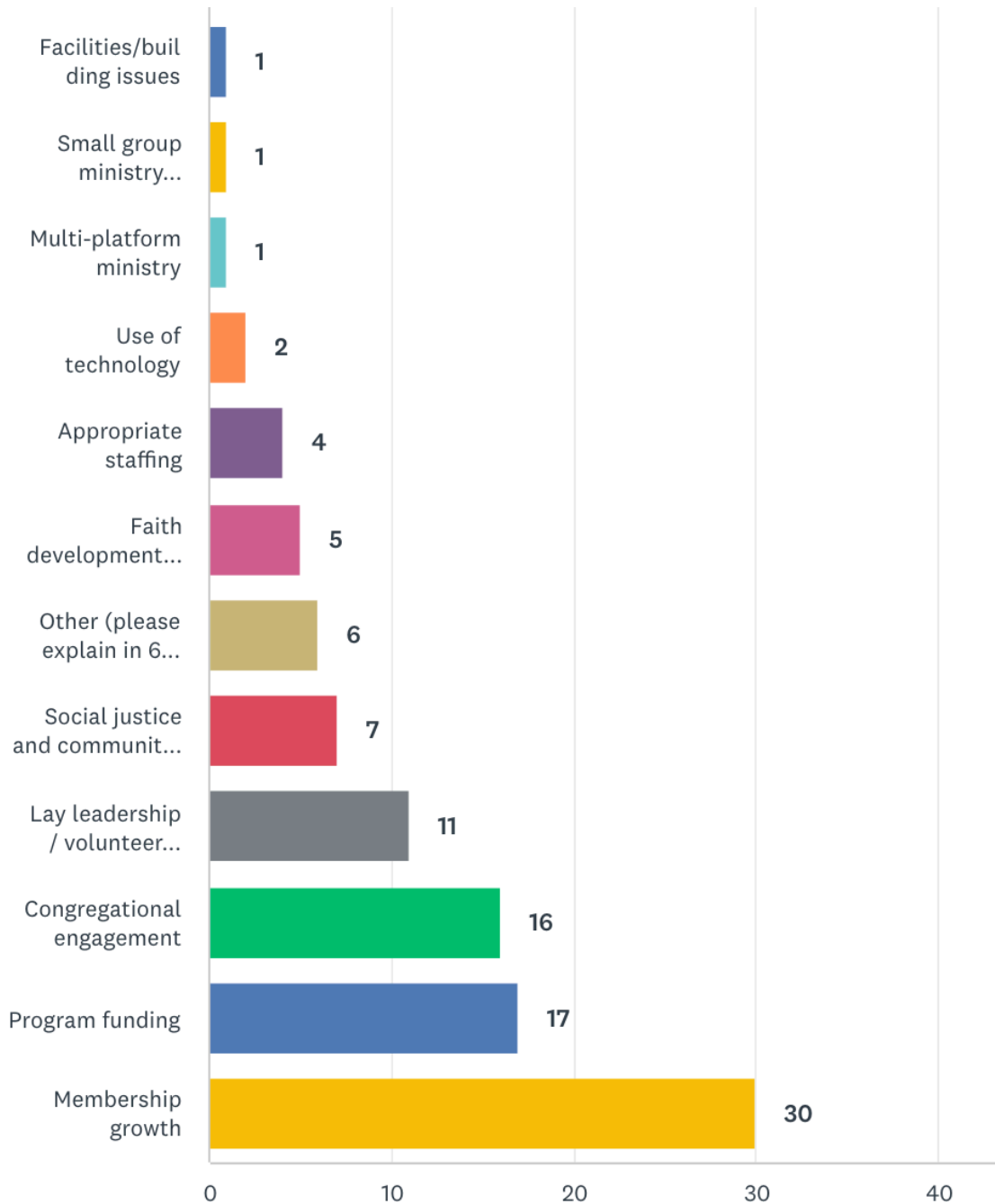
Q1: What are the 3 Greatest Strengths of UUFM?



Other responses:

1. Skilled members
2. Presence in community
3. Grounds/garden/green space.

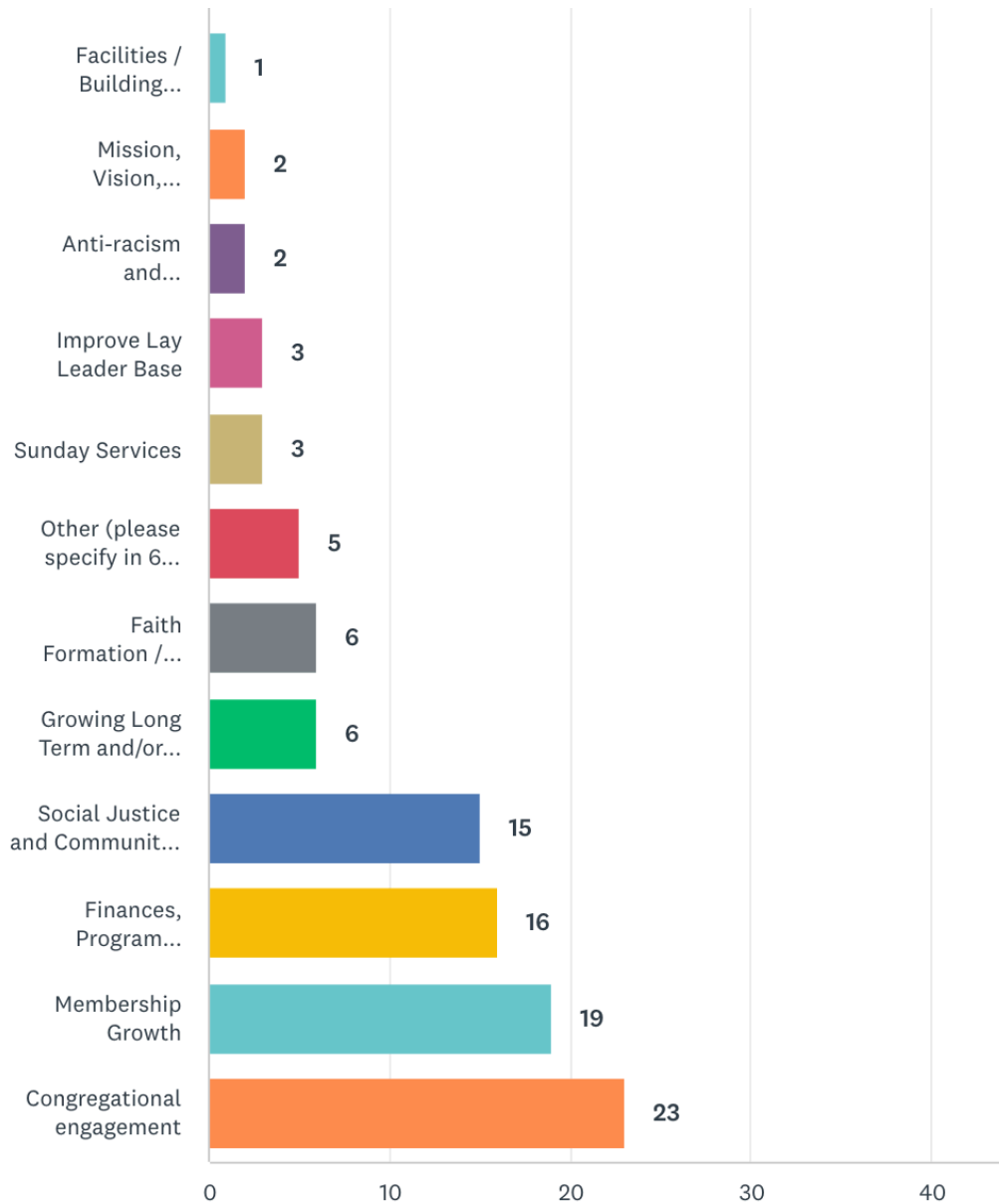
Q2: What are the 3 top challenges your congregation needs to address in the next five years?



Other responses:

1. Minister sermons need to be more inspiring/uplifting. Can be too serious.
2. Transition from virtual to in-person
3. Youth attendance
4. Hiring a pianist/musician for leading choir and songs for worship
5. Organizing to fight climate change
6. Covid recovery. Getting back to where we were pre-covid.

Q3: What are the 3 top priorities for furthering your mission going forward?



Other responses:

1. Small groups
2. More social opportunities! Fostering community will lead to more involvement in committees. Also we need to have in person speakers on Sundays when the minister is away – in person is still very much preferred.
3. Intersectionality with other entities who share values.
4. Number one to worship (for me) is having a real pianist/musician hired to lead choir and the songs for the congregation.

APPENDIX C

What do we do now?

Saturday Workshop Outline

All together:

Have people write on paper an answer to the questions.

Collect all the papers and redistribute them and have new people read them.

1. What have you lost?
2. What have you gained?
3. What are your congregation's greatest assets right now?

Leader writes responses on large sheets for all to see

Table discussions:

Tables of five or six people. Have people count off up to number of tables so they don't sit next to the same people as the first section. Discuss the following and take notes:

4. What role does UUFM have in the spiritual transformation of people in Mankato?
5. How might you manifest those roles using the assets you have now?
6. How can you engage more people in playing a role in making change?

For each idea for an initiative consider the following:

- What is the first step you'd like to take?
- Who is going to be responsible?
- When should that step be taken?
- How are leaders accountable?
- What would success look like?

Photos of the large sheets with responses on the following pages.

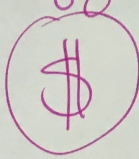
Jobs + Sorrows in person
Contributing

LOST ✓✓

Order of Service Paper
Hope & Positivity
Trust / Community / Fellowship
doesn't know who is around
Creativity + energy synergy

- ✓ Meats together
- ✓ Rummage Sale
- Opportunities to Socialize
- ✓ Coffee hour
- Clean up
- ✓ Speakers
- Learning Programs
- ✓ Choir leader
- MUSIC Belonging
- Live music every service
- ✓ Families w/ children + joy
- ✓ People not coming
- ✓ Members dying
- Habit of Attending
- Getting together in buildings
- Members

Mutual Reinforcement
Opportunity to welcome Strangers

Decrease in RE
Silent Auction (\$) 

Personal Contacts
New Younger Members

- ✓ Social Interactions
- ✓ Choir in person
- Home based
- Sunday Sermons
- Opportunities for Programs
- Community
- Less Dedication for the facility
- ✓ Momentum
- ✓ Touch/hugs
- ✓ Energy / volunteer
- Working in Community
- Fair Trade

GAINED

Opportunity to fix existing problems

✓ Tech Skills

Flexibility

✓ Hybrid Tech/Tech vs

Some Celebrations

Gratitude

✓ Shared worship online

Variety in worship

✓ Soul Matters

Connection thro Believers

Federal \$

Lower Costs

Zoom

✓ Services more accessible

Awareness of Importance of UU

✓ Faith in Ability to Survive

✓ Confidence in Commitments
Continuity

Patience

✓ Facing ^{Community Closeness} Struggle Together

Better Web presence

Independence / Agency for Team

✓ Appreciation of what matters + what we have

New ways of doing

✓ Recognition of Importance of Gathering physically

Land Acknowledgment

✓ Persistence / ^{Carrel on in face of Adversity}

✓ New Projector

New Cleaning Person

2 Communicators
- office Admin Peeps

Breeds

Dedicated Leaders

✓ Walking group

Breakfast group on Zoom

Wed lunch at Mall

Opportunity to Address & Address Problems

Visibility from Highway
 Artwork + Entryway
 Buildings + lot
 Minister PT
 Staff
 Reserves
 Garden
 Solar Panels
 Members / commitment + Dedication
 History / continuity
 Compassion
 Curiosity
 Openness to outsiders
 Welcoming Nature
 SJ work / commitment + Dedication
 Willingness to engage in debate w/ one another
 idealism
 Loyal supporters / community support for CFD program
 Pleasant space
 Marketable brand Potential

UUFM ASSETS

Sense of Community Outreach
 Memorial Meditation Garden
 Open to Risks
 Help from UUA
 Mission Statement

Great Cooks
 Rental Property
 Web Page
 Volunteers / core group
 Green Sanctuary Cert
 Welcoming Congregation
 Regulars
 Retirees w/ Time skills + experience
 Low debt
 Connections w/ UUA
 Community Org Connections
 People w/ skills + expertise
 UU Principles / UU Faith
 Walk We Talk
 Library
 Play ground
 Legacy Gifts
 Congregational Policy Setting