

**2025 Winter Congregational Meeting
First Universalist Church of Denver
Sunday, February 16, 2025, 11:40 am – 1:40 pm**

Draft Minutes

Goals for the Day:

- Vote on new member for the Committee on Shared Ministry
- Review and discuss COSM Survey Results
- Overview and discussion of 2025-26 Goal Budget
- Update and Engagement with Church Strategic Planning Process
- Discuss Council Reports and Plans
- Listen, learn, ask questions, and be energized and grateful for our community.

Agenda:

11:40: Opening and chalice lighting: John Ehrmann, Moderator, and Rev. Eric Banner, Senior Minister.

11:45: Reading the Covenant: Josephine Hehnke, Vice-Moderator

11:47: Meeting Procedures Overview: John Ehrmann outlines meeting procedures for attending and voting, in person and online. There is a quorum for today's meeting. There will be two Agenda items to vote on at the meeting: Accept the draft agenda and Minutes from the Fall Congregational Meeting, and vote on a candidate for Committee on Shared Ministry to fill a vacant position. John, as Moderator, requests that the votes be by voice vote, or chat indication for those attending virtually. He outlines the procedure for online comments and questions to be heard in the meeting. He informs that the meeting is open to items not on the Agenda, and that they may be presented from the floor through accepted meeting procedures.

11:52: Vote on Consent Agenda and Minutes from Fall 2024 Congregational meeting:

Motion to approve Agenda and Minutes from Fall 2024 Congregational Meeting: Jill Van de Water so moves. Spud Van de Water seconds. There is no discussion. A voice vote is called for. Motion passes.

11:55: Nominations Committee Recommendation and vote for new COSM member:

Motion to approve Ann Christensen as new member to Committee On Shared Ministry. Betsy Rogers so moves. Dan Moen seconds. There is no discussion. A voice vote is called for. Motion passes.

12:00: Review and Discussion of Committee on Shared Ministry

Church Survey Results: COSM member Don Bacon presents highlights from the recent COSM survey, and some of the methodology used. COSM is charged with gathering feedback on the state of the church. The results are shared with the congregation, and is available to the Board and church leadership. He reports that the full survey results and report are available online.

199 people responded out of approximately 400 members. A five point scale was used for responses to questions. He notes this is a high response rate for this type of survey, and the highest he has seen in his work on surveys at First Universalist. He asks; does this survey represent the congregation? The survey results are similar to membership information in terms of length of membership. The survey sample is representative of the population of the church. Results indicating approval of the church are similar or better than result of prior surveys. 90% of responses approved, or strongly approved.

To the survey question; what are you seeking at church? Community was top response. Inspiration, spiritual growth and social justice rounded out the top four. 71% of congregation is over 65 years old. 15 to 20 years ago it would have been in the high 20% range. This follows a national trend in church congregations.

Attending Sunday Services, Interest Groups, Community Meals and Potlucks, and Spiritual Small Groups were the top four areas of involvement. People attended one of these 3.8 times a month on average per person. In 2004 it was closer to 4.9. This is an interesting data point that could be investigated further.

Don presented some highlights of the comments received in addition to the survey questions. Some comments were contradictory, as in requesting more of something, while others say less of the same thing. Some comments asked what the differences were in membership and non-membership of the church. Some comments concerned accommodating older congregants.

Don states that members of COSM are available to listen to questions from the floor, and individually after the meeting.

John Ehrmann adds that COSM will be coordinating with the Board and the Strategic Planning Committee for an integrated approach in surveys and information gathering.

Questions/answers from the floor (edited)

Q: How did you compensate for bias in the survey, as in those participating in the survey having a favorable view, and what steps do you plan to reach out to those who didn't participate?

A: Don acknowledges that survey participants are likely to be more engaged and, and as a result, happier. Less engaged people may not be as excited. He notes that participation was high in this survey compared to previous ones.

Q: Seniors make up 70% percent of respondents, not 70% of the congregation?

A: Yes 70% of respondents were seniors, defining seniors as 65 years and older. He noted that this is also close to the percentage in the congregation.

Q: Why is there no information on 18-35 age category.

A: Don says there were no respondents in the 18-25 and 26-35 age categories. It could be an area to think about in future surveys.

Q: Comment on younger members leaving in the past, could this be an area for strategic planning to look at? What is planned to follow up on the survey results, and when? Will it be connected to strategic planning?

A: Don states this is in process. It may involve joint listening sessions with COSM and the strategic planning group.

A: In response to last two questions John Ehrmann acknowledges a need to find ways to reach groups and people who were less responsive. Other means and channels of communication will be considered.

Q: Is it a concerning trend to have a demographic of increasing older membership?

A: Don notes this may be a common trend in churches, and perhaps more pronounced at First Universalist.

12:30: Overview and Discussion of Goal Budget: Toni Nading, Treasurer and Katie Edwards, Executive Director: An opening statement from Toni Nading is read. In it she complements the dedication and efforts of the Standing Committee on Finance; Ida Merritt, Josie Faix, Alicia Green, and Nancy Oberg, as well as the Standing Committee on the Endowment; Tom Abood, Charlie Lyon, and Toni Ruckel. Also Executive Director Katie Edwards.

Katie Edwards presents the Goal Budget with supporting slides as preliminary numbers that will be updated for the May Congregational meeting. Documents with information on the budget were distributed in advance of the meeting.

Preliminary to the budget presentation, she presents the current financial health of the church. First Universalist is a 6.5 million dollar organization. Most of that is in assets. The majority is in the building and land, with a mortgage of about \$300,000. There are about \$600,000 in liabilities. The Endowment Fund holds about \$500,000. She states the church is in a strong financial position, with most of the assets tied up in the building and land. There is cash assets on hand to operate the church for six months.

The church recently received two generous bequests from the estates of Dick Freidman, of \$400,000, and Milt Hetrick of approximately \$200,000. The Milt Hetrick bequest is restricted to the building and sustainability efforts.

The goal budget will be approximately \$1,000,000. There is a budget shortfall of approximately \$73,000. Total expenses are projected to increase by 10%.

Staff expenses to increase by 6%: Non-senior staff compensation to increase 3% as recommended by the UUA. Senior staff to receive a 2.6% cost of living increase. Health insurance costs will increase. Some extra hours have been added for a Facility Coordinator position, to better manage church rentals.

Operations expenses to increase by 17%: Inflation is a factor in this area. Previously underfunding maintenance and repair costs have had an impact. General operating insurance is increasing. There was a 20% increase last November. The budget reflects another 20% increase. The insurance market is experiencing distress, with many church policies being cancelled. Snow removal costs have increased. Having a maintenance contract with 5280 Maintenance has brought maintenance costs from \$2,900 a month to \$1,300 a month. Having a relatively new building has complicated predicting what should be budgeted for maintenance.

Program expenses: Program expenses appear to increase but it is because of Compassion in Action collections being passed through the church and directly to the groups receiving.

Looking at possible ways to increase revenue. The largest source of revenue is from pledges. The Stewardship team came up with a stretch goal of \$730,000 for this year's campaign. This is a 5% increase of existing pledges. It does not take into account new member pledges that could have a positive impact on revenue.

Questions/answers from the floor (edited)

Q: Question on social justice income. Where does it come from?

A: Most social justice income is from Compassion in Action offerings. A little bit is from the World Gift Market.

A comment was made updating the congregation on the ending of the Safe Parking Program due to the City of Denver terminating the program. Thanks was offered to the congregation for the help and support given to all the people the program helped, for almost four years.

Q: Are we putting money away for a second minister?

A: Not yet.

Q: Is the increase in Compassion in Action due to having more Sundays, or are people giving more?

A: People are giving more generously to both Beloved Community, and Compassion in Action.

Q: Younger people are financially challenged. How can the church engage the 18-35, or 20-40 groups knowing they may not be able to contribute as much as others?

A: Katie would like all younger people to know that a pledge should not be a barrier. She gives as an example her first pledge, while in her 20's, was \$1 a month. She states there is a pledge waiver program for those facing financial challenges.

Q: Part of the vision is providing sanctuary. Safe Parking did a wonderful job, but now it's done. It was talked about at one time, but is there still interest in providing sanctuary within our building as other churches have done?

A: At this moment, with increased building use, and our rental relationships, it would be challenging to have someone living here. Other ways to be allies in immigration justice work are being explored.

Q: Perhaps growing membership can cover the \$73,000 shortfall. Is there concern this could lead to an unsustainable cycle of needing new membership to meet the budget?

A: While the building was renovated to support a larger community, Katie does not favor relying on growth. Three solutions were offered for the shortfall; reducing expenses, increasing income, and using reserves. The Board had also highlighted possible interest income from bequests not listed in the budget.

12:54: Questions/comments on Council Reports

If needed, more information will be provided in response to questions following the meeting.

12:55: Update and Engagement with Strategic Planning Process,

Board of Trustees: John Ehrmann: The bylaws call for strategic planning every three years. Last year, the Mission and Vision statements were updated. This year, following up on that work, strategic planning will take place. Board members Christian Onsager, Dee Sweeney, and Pete Christensen will help coordinate implementing this process.

Christian: The church will work on a strategic plan covering the next five years. Meetings are taking place to develop a process for strategic planning. This work is preliminary, no details have been worked out yet. There are five themes that can be extracted from the Mission and Vision statements to help to guide a strategic plan. They are: Spiritual Growth, Community, Connection, Building the World, and Sanctuary. The strategic plan will identify priorities for the next five years, identify resources, and the areas they can be applied effectively. As an example of the process, Christian asks; If you were to look at a headline about the church five years from now, what would you want it to say? The plan will look at where we want to be, and in parallel to that, also how will a growing congregation be managed? It is apparent that growth is happening, and the plan will need to encompass that. There was a question earlier about adding a second minister. The plan will need to address this and other more granular questions around growth. The Board's role is to guide the process, to ensure that it is transparent, and all in the community feel involved and heard. Ultimately the strategic plan will be approved by the congregation. Our democratic process will decide what priorities are identified and then acted upon. Upon approval by the congregation, implementation of the strategic plan will be separate from developing the plan, and overseen by the Board.

Pete Christensen: A Strategic Planning Committee is forming from members of the congregation. It is not complete yet. An announcement of team members will be made later. The process for the next several months will be to design ways to gather information. Surveys, cottage meetings, listening sessions are some of the ways to engage with the First Universalist community are in discussion. The questions to be asked are getting careful consideration. The COSM survey, discussed earlier today, is a great example of information gathering the Strategic Planning Committee hopes to employ. The information gathered from the previous Mission and Vision work is also available to the committee.

Christian Onsager: The proposed timeline for this Spring is to gather information and formulate what big questions to ask. Over Summer having small groups working on possible goals and objectives. Have an initial set of plans, goals, and objectives to be circulated in the Fall. The overall timeline to get to a congregational vote is 12 to 18 months. These are big

and important questions. There will be differences of opinion, and a lot of work to be done. The goal of this process is to have a document the Board consults on a regular basis and finds crucial to their decision making.

Questions/answers from the floor (edited)

Q: During Rev. Stephan Papa's time here, there were two called ministers and an assistant or associate minister. Rev. Eric is the sole minister today. He's good, but he's not three ministers. Is that going into the plan?

A: We are not there yet. We are early in the process, but that seems like an important area to look at. In previous times, growth at First Universalist was not planned for successfully, and the result was not good.

Q: There is an increasing number of people who engage via live streaming. This week there were 80 people watching online. Would a needed upgrade to the live streaming setup be considered?

A: It is an important area to look at. An important way to engage with younger people, and also older people more comfortable connecting from home.

Q: A followup to previous question. How do you create community and connection with people participating alone from their living rooms?

A: This is a challenge. It is something already in discussion with the team.

1:39: Closing Words and Extinguish the Chalice: Rev Eric Banner: Our sister congregation in Ft. Collins say they are there to spread courageous joy. There is a place to spread courageous joy here in Denver. This what democracy looks like.

1:40: Adjourn