

Congregational Survey 2025: Select Results

In January 2025 the Board of Trustees surveyed congregants to better understand their interests, demographics, and to assess how the church is achieving its stated mission and goals. The survey was sent to our email list of 1600 congregants and friends. Congregants could also request a paper copy. 434 people completed the survey.

First Unitarian Portland is in preparation for strategic planning in this coming church year, and our survey questions ranged broadly over the many goals and concerns of our religious community. In 2006 First Unitarian developed an instrument with similarly broad goals, so the present survey adopted the questions from that survey to allow comparisons between the present responses with those from two decades ago.

Sunday Services Attendance: Our respondents commonly attend Sunday services in person on most Sundays (43%), with many at Sunday services 1-2 times a month (23%), and 34% attending less than once a month or on special occasions. Our on-line participants are a sizeable group of our congregation, with 14% participating most Sundays, 24% on-line 1-2 times a month, and 62% tuning in less than once a month or on special occasions.

Other Church Activities: Most commonly our respondents have participated in adult RE (49%), volunteer service (47%), social justice programs (46%), and social activities (45%) at First U. Sizeable groups have also participated in children's RE (32%), the Alliance (35%), and small group programs (38%). Many of our congregants have also served as ushers (21%) and have participated in the music programs (26%). Other smaller programs can be equally important for congregant engagement and/or providing essential support to the church as an organization (e.g. YRUU 8%, art wall 10%, governance 13%, and lay ministry 10%).

Our congregants come seeking community (73%), spiritual growth (55%), Sunday services (52%), intellectual engagement (46%), and social justice work (41%). Others seek RE for children (27%), social activities (27%), volunteer opportunities (26%), adult classes (25%), and the music program (21%). Some come to our church seeking support in transitions (11%), Easter/Christmas services (7%), and a place to get married (3%). The same programs keep people coming back, the most common being community (64%) and Sunday services (62%).

Comparing Ratings 2006 vs. 2025: First U. strives to create a welcoming community of diverse individuals, promoting love, reason and freedom in religion. Since our survey questions came from the 2006 survey, we can compare responses from the two points in time. However, the 2006 survey was taken during a Sunday service, while our respondents varied in their connection to the church, some attending rarely. To enable a fairer comparison between our present results and the 2006 data, we looked at responses of the 254 regular attenders in our sample who reported attending services on most Sundays. We found this subgroup to be most comparable to the 2006 sample answering the survey questions in a Sunday service. The table below shows the mean agreement (on a 5 point scale) of these 2006 and 2025 groups about whether First Unitarian Church is fulfilling its key goals.

	2006	Regular Attenders 2025
Is a welcoming/loving community	4.48	4.45
Worship inspires, affirms, and deepens	4.80	4.70
Supports all in search for truth & meaning	4.64	4.51
Promotes social justice in Portland & beyond	4.77	4.60
Cultivates leaders who serve & inspire	4.47	4.17
Congregants are generous w/time & money	4.43	4.28
Takes leadership in broader UU community	4.64	4.01
Is transparent in church decision making	4.35	3.64

Comparing the ratings between the two groups we see comparably high means for the first four goals listed: welcoming community, inspiring worship, supporting search for truth, and promoting social justice. Rating differences are modest for cultivating leaders and congregant generosity. However, differences between the two groups are sizeable for taking leadership in the broader UU community and transparency in decision making.

We also have an opportunity to consider congregant engagement with programs at First Unitarian in the 2025 and 2006 samples. The table below compares the two groups on their activities at First U.

What keeps you coming back?	Regular attenders 2025	2006 Respondents	What do you participate in?	Regular attenders 2025	2006 Respondents
Spiritual growth	58%	85%	Adult RE classes	50%	39%
Sunday Worship	80%	74%	Small Group	44%	7%
Community	77%	82%	Choir/Music Program participation	25%	24%
Social activities	29%	28%	Children's RE	27%	38%
Intellectual Engagement	48%	52%	Alliance	42%	21%
Social Justice	47%	30%	Volunteer Service	51%	25%
RE for children	12%	N/A	Social Justice	51%	30%
Music Program participation	17%	N/A	Social Activities	48%	28%
Support in transitions	15%	N/A	Hospitality/Ushers	25%	19%
Adult classes	22%	N/A	Art Wall	9%	N/A
Volunteer Opportunities	33%	N/A	Lay Ministry	13%	N/A
Support in difficult times	31%	N/A	Outreach/media	3%	N/A
			YRUU	7%	N/A
Average age	71.6 years	51.6 years	Governance	15%	N/A
Years attending	18.6 years	7.4 years	Stewardship	13%	N/A

When asked what keeps people coming back to church, most consistent draws are Sunday worship and the church community (74% - 82% for 2006 and 2025 samples). However, the two groups are quite different in interest in spiritual growth at First Unitarian, cited by 85% of the 2006 group vs. 58% in 2025. We see an increase in interest in social justice activities from 2006 to 2025, from 30% to 47%, while interest is steady in intellectual engagement (52% and 48%). Social activities are less of a draw in both groups (28% and 29%). The 2025 sample shows higher participation in most of these activities. However, note that the 2025 sample has had more than twice as many years to participate (18.6 vs. 7.4 years), likely contributing to their higher reported participation rates.

Perhaps the most striking finding of our 2025 survey compared to 2006 was the aging of the full sample (average age 68.9 years) and regular attenders (average age 71.6 yrs) compared to the 51.6 yr average age in 2006. In 20 yrs the congregation appears ~ 20 years older. Many of the differences noted in the two samples may be linked to fact that the respondents are at different stages of life concerns.

These findings show trends worthy of further consideration as we look back on our 2024-25 church year and forward to the years ahead. Full results are available at: <https://www.firstunitarianportland.org/about-us/board/>