

SMALL GROUP CONVERSATIONS:

UUSM Congregational Snapshot for Prospective Ministers

Who We Are

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Santa Monica (UUSM) is a **welcoming, energetic, and intellectually curious** community with deep roots and a strong sense of purpose.

We are **progressive, compassionate, and values-driven**, known for our **commitment to lifelong learning, social justice, and spiritual exploration**.

Our community is **warm, caring, and generous**—people show up for each other.

We are also **diverse in belief** (atheist to deeply spiritual) and **united by shared principles** rather than dogma.

While our congregation **skews older**, we are welcoming an **influx of young adults and families**, creating an exciting opportunity for **intergenerational connection and renewal**.

Our Strengths

- **Intellectual & spiritual depth** – strong Adult RE, engaged conversations, and thought-provoking sermons.
 - **Warm relationships** – deep love and care among members; supportive community.
 - **Vibrant programs** – outstanding music, arts, social justice, and educational opportunities.
 - **Beautiful, welcoming campus** – often the first point of connection for newcomers.
 - **Commitment to justice** – active in UU the Vote, environmental and equity work.
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Our Growing Edges

- Desire to **better connect across age groups** and **integrate youth and families** into congregational life.
- Need to **bridge silos** among committees and initiatives.
- Aspiration to become **more diverse** racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically.
- Want to **balance intellect and heart**, bringing more emotional and spiritual grounding.
- Need to **develop new volunteers and lay leadership** to sustain our ministries.

What We Seek in a Minister

We are looking for a **warm, collaborative, and inspiring leader** who can help us grow spiritually, relationally, and as a community.

Key Qualities:

- **Heart-centered and authentic** – approachable, compassionate, and grounded in care.
- **Inspiring worship leader** – delivers sermons that speak to both mind and spirit.
- **Collaborative leader** – builds trust, works with the board and staff, and empowers lay leaders.
- **Excellent communicator and listener** – genuinely interested in people’s stories and experiences.
- **Emotionally intelligent and self-aware** – handles conflict with grace and curiosity.
- **Spiritually grounded** – honors diverse beliefs and connects spirituality with everyday living.
- **Community builder** – bridges generations and encourages participation and volunteerism.
- **Active in justice and outreach** – engaged in the wider community and public issues.
- **Good administrator** – organized, reliable, and respectful of staff and structures.

The Role We Envision

- **Inspire us through worship** and help us connect faith with action.
 - **Be a visible, caring presence**—someone who knows our names, celebrates our joys, and supports us in times of loss.
 - **Collaborate, not command**—work alongside staff, board, and committees as a partner in shared ministry.
 - **Nurture intergenerational connection** and strengthen relationships across the congregation.
 - **Represent UUSM and Unitarian Universalism** proudly in the broader Santa Monica and Los Angeles community.
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Our Vision

We aspire to be a **vibrant, inclusive, and spiritually alive** congregation—one that honors its rich history while joyfully embracing change.

We seek a minister who will **walk with us** as we continue to grow into a more **connected, compassionate, and justice-centered** faith community.

Major Themes

Here's a **summary of the notes organized by major themes** that emerge across all groups (CYRE, Cottage Conversations, and Focus Groups).

1. Congregational Identity & Culture

Welcoming, intellectual, and values-driven

- Described as *welcoming, accepting, non-judgmental, progressive, energetic, and positive*.
- *Deep commitment to learning, intellectual exploration, and social justice*.
- *Highly educated, curious, and reflective*; many are lifelong learners.

Community dynamics

- Strong *core relationships* and love among members.
- *Skews older* but with *recent growth in young families* and *multi-generational potential*.
- Some *disconnects between age groups* and a desire for more *intergenerational integration*.

Strengths

- *Music, art, and Adult RE (Religious Education)* are standout strengths.
- *Warm, supportive, and generous* community.
- *Active in social justice* (e.g., UU the Vote, marches).
- Beautiful, welcoming campus that draws visitors.

Challenges

- *Compartmentalization*—many groups and committees, but fewer all-congregation efforts.
- *Communication gaps* between groups and between adults and youth.

- Congregation is *predominantly white and older*, with limited racial/ethnic diversity.
 - Some perceive *class/wealth dynamics* as unintentionally excluding.
 - *Needs more volunteers* and leadership development.
 - Sometimes “*more head than heart*”—intellectual but less emotionally or spiritually connected.
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2. Desired Minister Qualities & Skills

Personal Presence & Style

- *Warm, approachable, humble, genuine, compassionate, caring.*
- *High emotional intelligence* and *excellent listener.*
- *Charismatic and engaging*—draws people in naturally.
- Comfortable being *socially present* (at coffee hour, events, community gatherings).
- *Extroverted or people-oriented*, but authenticity is more important than personality type.
- *Good sense of humor* and don't take themselves too seriously.

Spiritual & Intellectual Depth

- *Grounded in spirituality and UU principles*; able to connect head and heart.
- *Strong, inspirational preacher*—sermons that move people emotionally and spiritually, not just intellectually.
- *Able to handle life's big issues* (grief, death, purpose) with compassion.
- *Inclusive in theology*—embraces diverse beliefs and backgrounds (“big tent” approach).
- *Connects spirituality with action* (justice, nature, compassion).

Leadership & Administration

- *Collaborative, non-hierarchical, non-defensive.*
- *Strong relationship-builder*—with staff, board, committees, and members.
- *Manages conflict well*; builds trust and respects staff boundaries.
- *Capable administrator* with good time management and organizational skills.
- *Supports and empowers lay leaders*; fosters volunteerism.
- *Understands systems and group dynamics.*

Vision & Community Building

- *Builder and connector*—can unify diverse groups and bridge generations.
- *Visionary* but also *observant and respectful* of what's already working.

- *Encourages intergenerational connection* and deeper engagement of families and youth.
 - *Committed to social justice* and active in the broader community.
 - *Promotes anti-oppression and diversity.*
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3. Minister's Role & Responsibilities

Worship & Inspiration

- *Preaching and worship are central.* Inspiring, thoughtful, and emotionally resonant sermons are essential.
- *Great storyteller and communicator* who helps people think and feel deeply.
- *Brings spiritual grounding* and invites reflection on life's meaning.

Pastoral Care

- *Highly valued across all groups.*
- *Should know congregants personally,* provide *comfort and presence in times of loss or crisis,* and *build trust through genuine care.*

Community Leadership

- *Support what's working; integrate where there are gaps.*
- *Collaborate with the board and staff;* let the board lead governance.
- *Strengthen intergenerational and volunteer connections.*
- *Be visible and active*—not just in the pulpit, but in daily church life.
- *Represent UU values publicly* and engage with the wider Los Angeles community.

Integration & Growth

- *Unify diverse subgroups* within the congregation.
 - *Encourage younger and newer members* while honoring long-time congregants.
 - *Build an inclusive, caring, and spiritually vibrant community.*
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Overall Themes

Theme	Essence
Head & Heart Balance	Desire for both intellectual depth and emotional/spiritual connection.
Intergenerational Connection	Need to bridge age groups and integrate youth and families into congregational life.
Collaboration & Trust	Minister should model shared leadership and foster mutual respect.
Inspiration & Presence	Sermons, pastoral care, and relational authenticity define effective ministry.
Growth & Inclusion	Aim to evolve into a more diverse, connected, and community-oriented congregation.

How Congregants Describe UUSM

Overall character

- Welcoming, accepting, intellectually curious, socially engaged, and non-judgmental.
- Deeply connected to **lifelong learning**, **social justice**, and **spiritual diversity**.
- Has a **beautiful, safe, and vibrant campus** with great music and art programs.

- Members are **educated, thoughtful, and independent-minded**, sometimes strong-willed or cantankerous.
 - The congregation is **aging and skews older**, but **younger families and adults are beginning to join**.
 - **Not racially or ethnically diverse**, though open and inclusive in spirit.
 - Known for being **progressive, welcoming, and community-minded**, yet **somewhat compartmentalized** — committees and age groups sometimes work in silos.
 - **Strong programs** (Adult RE, Social Justice, Music), but **youth and RE feel somewhat separate** from the main congregation.
 - Sometimes struggles with **volunteer fatigue** and **connecting generations**.
 - Past **staff/minister conflicts** have left sensitivities around leadership style.
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🌟 Qualities & Skills Desired in a New Minister

Core traits

- **Inspiring, charismatic, and engaging** speaker who delivers **heart-centered, relatable sermons** that balance intellect and emotion.
 - **Warm, compassionate, humble**, and **genuinely caring** toward individuals.
 - **Collaborative and non-authoritarian** leadership style — builds trust and works *with* committees, not above them.
 - **High emotional intelligence (EQ)**, **excellent listener**, and able to handle conflict constructively.
 - **Strong administrator and organizer** — able to manage staff relationships and church operations smoothly.
 - **Deeply spiritual**, grounded in UU values and religious understanding, but not overly academic or preachy.
 - **Extroverted or authentically relational** — checks in on people, remembers names, shows up at events.
 - **Builder and visionary** — helps UUSM grow authentically while honoring what already works.
 - **Committed to intergenerational connection** — finding ways to integrate children, youth, and families more fully into worship life.
 - **Sense of humor**, self-aware, approachable, and joyful.
 - **Values diversity**, supports social justice, environmental care, and anti-oppression work.
 - **Supports volunteers and emerging leaders**, nurturing a sense of shared ministry.
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Most Important Parts of the Minister's Job

- **Inspire through worship and preaching** — meaningful, emotionally resonant sermons are central.
 - **Provide pastoral care** — being present and genuinely caring, especially in times of grief or crisis.
 - **Foster connection** across generations and committees; strengthen the sense of shared community.
 - **Be visible and engaged** — attend social events, coffee hours, and community activities.
 - **Lead collaboratively** — empower lay leaders, respect staff, and share decision-making with the board.
 - **Model UU values** — integrity, compassion, openness, and justice.
 - **Guide the congregation's vision** while building trust and mutual respect.
 - **Connect the church to the wider community** — advocate publicly for justice and represent UU values locally.
 - **Encourage growth** (spiritual, relational, and numerical) while caring for both older and newer members.
 - **Be consistent and reliable** — show up regularly and be a steady, trusted presence.
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Key Takeaways for the Search Committee

- **Ask about relationship-building:** How has the minister connected personally with congregants in the past? How do they build trust?
- **Look for balance:** head and heart, vision and practicality, inspiration and management.
- **Find someone who can unite the whole congregation** — across generations, committees, and spiritual styles — while continuing to celebrate UUSM's diversity, creativity, and social conscience.

NOTE: This is the first of the three AI summaries of the conversations from the master doc. It seems like a lot of potential redundancy to include all three but I wonder about trying to merge or otherwise incorporate them. -James