

Summary of Small Group Experience

Unitarian Church of Lincoln Ministerial Search Committee
September-November, 2025

Our Approach

Following the Congregational Survey in September, 2025, the Ministerial Search Committee reviewed preliminary survey results and considered what information would be needed for the questionnaire to design a plan for the small focus group sessions. From late September through early November, around 100 friends and members participated in a small group or, occasionally, provided email answers to the questions. Groups of 2-10 participants were held in person at the church, via zoom, and off site, including at an assisted living facility where several members reside. Many people participated through their involvement with the formal organizational structure of the church or small group activities. Committees and the Board graciously allowed us to take over their monthly meeting for a focus group. Search Committee members joined monthly potlucks, coffee discussions, and craft groups. In addition, the Search Committee held a series of in-person and zoom groups on a Saturday with sign-ups distributed through the weekly e-blast and before/after Sunday services. Special efforts were made to reach congregants who are not part of the formal organizational structure or regular Sunday morning attendees by constantly asking “who’s voice have we not yet heard.” Each group lasted 45-60 minutes.

Typically two search committee members ran each small group with one asking the questions and the other recording responses without identifying who said what. For some smaller groups, one search committee member fulfilled both roles. Following a brief orientation to the ground rules (speak for yourself; respond to the question, not another’s comments; data will be de-identified and summarized) each group answered the following questions:

- **Why do you stay?**
- **What do you hope never changes?**
- **How is the trust in the congregation?**
- **How can the minister best build trust?**
- **How can a minister break trust?**
- **What skills, talents, interests do you hope the next minister will have?**
- **What is a source of pride? (added after the first few groups)**

The groups also reviewed the two word clouds shown below that came from responses to the congregational survey. Prompts for the word clouds were: “What are your initial responses (to the Word Clouds)?” “Does this feel true?”

After all groups were finished, the search committee divided ourselves into pairs and each pair took several questions for analysis. The pairs separately identified themes and key ideas in the responses then came together to compare their findings. A summary of the themes is described below.

Summary of Small Focus Group Themes by Question

Why do you stay?

We stay at the church because of the community we find here. Many people described the church as a safe harbor, chosen family, or my people. For many, it is the only place in Lincoln that reflects their values so it is especially important since other religious groups are a poor fit. There are also key aspects of our community that particularly draw us in, including the music, social justice work, and our social activism.

What do you hope never changes?

A significant portion of group members responded to this question with the hope that we never stop changing. They see the congregation as open to change, new experiences, and new ways of doing things and hope that this openness never changes.

Other responses to what we hope never changes were consistent with why people stay. Congregants want to keep the atmosphere and activities that are drawing them in. Others mentioned specific activities that they hope will continue including aspects of Sunday Service (Share the Plate, Time for All Ages), the annual Souper Supper, and our support for the arts.

Another theme from this question was the loving atmosphere that many people find in the church. They experience the congregation as caring, optimistic, welcoming, and loving, combined with opportunities to explore new ideas and challenge one's way of thinking in a way that does not demean or discount.

What skills, talents, interests do you hope the next minister will have?

This question generated much discussion and many ideas, leading many groups to jokingly mention that clearly we want someone who can do it all, while sheepishly realizing that is not realistic. Nevertheless, there was a strong interest in having a minister who can lead high quality Sunday services. Although there was some variability in the meaning of "high quality," it included a well-designed service where the elements are well-integrated. We want someone who can do strong sermons, defined in various ways including intellectual, discussing world events, inspirational, good orator, thought-provoking, and showing vulnerability. This could be summarized as "a good message" that is *engaging, makes you think, and has personal elements*.

We hope our next minister has good communication skills, returns emails, and gets to know all members of the congregation, not just leadership. But most of all, we want a minister with a good sense of humor. We see our sense of humor as a strength of our congregation and want the minister to engage with us in that way.

Given how important our social justice and community work is to us, we want the minister to be the public face of our congregation, being visible and perhaps engaging in interfaith leadership. The minister does not need to lead social justice or climate justice work as the congregation takes the initiative. However, being knowledgeable and supportive is important to many congregants.

There was a subset of participants in the groups for whom pastoral care from the minister is very important. Others believe the minister would not always need to provide the care but could facilitate congregational pastoral care.

How is trust in the congregation?

Overall, trust is good in the congregation, though there are differences amongst members. Some have never questioned whether trust was present or not, while a few members have different experiences/relationships with trust at the church.

“Trust must be fine because I never really have to think about it much.”

“I trust the congregation is what it says it is -welcoming, open-minded.”

“I felt equally non-trusting inside/outside of the congregation. I have to make trusting people irrelevant to my participation. Then I am not disappointed or pissed off [and] don’t have to code switch all the time.”

I can remember as a young person (age 30), people trusted me to take leadership. We see that throughout the church. We support you!

I trust the church community to carry on through disasters.

While others alluded to the reasons they felt trust in the church (consistency, support, transparency), one respondent offered a summary explanation for why trust existed in the congregation, “...despite our varied beliefs and lifestyles, we share a common orientation toward compassion, justice, and authenticity. That shared grounding makes it easier to believe in one another’s good intentions.”

How can a minister break trust?

We’ve lived through an interim minister who broke our trust. Because he presented differently to different people, it was not clear to many what was happening in some committee meetings and between the minister and staff. Since we’ve seen it before, we’re likely to identify it quickly and call it out sooner if it were to happen again.

A minister can break our trust with dishonesty, failing to keep confidence, violating boundaries, breaking our covenant of right relations, treating people disrespectfully, being judgmental, unkind, condescending, financial misappropriations and sexual misconduct.

Micromanaging will also be a red flag for us. “A new minister coming here and expecting to be able to run the circus altogether without regard to our history and tradition, would be a breach of trust.”

How can the minister best build trust?

A minister who comes in with an open mind rather than a predetermined agenda will help build trust. Group members consistently mentioned honesty, approachability, transparency, integrity, and putting effort into building relationships with all congregants, including homebound or hospitalized, as important for building trust. Following through on commitments, even small ones, is important. We’d like the minister to feel comfortable telling us about their journey.

“By listening deeply and with genuine curiosity. By following through on commitments, even small ones. By being transparent, approachable, and honest—especially when something is difficult to say. Building trust also means showing humility, valuing collaboration, and truly seeing each congregant as a partner in ministry rather than a follower.”

What is a source of pride?

Consistent with our mission, many responses to this question could be summarized as WE SHOW UP: We show up for each other and in the community, carrying out a long tradition in this church that we are proud of. We are recognized by others as a group at community events. Our building is a

beautiful and accessible resource for the community groups. Our Share the Plate program supports community agencies and organizations that share our values, chosen by a democratic process each year.

Other congregants mentioned specific ways we show up. Our long history and tradition of being welcoming to LGBTQAI+ people and leadership around these efforts in the community is a source of pride. We are proud of our deep involvement in Justice in Action.

The variety and quality of our music, including music on Sunday morning, and support for the arts in general, are also sources of pride.

Word Clouds from Congregational Survey

These word clouds were generated from questions in the congregational survey, as indicated above the word cloud.

Congregational Survey Question: What is the most important trait for a minister to have as they work with this congregation?



Reactions to this word cloud suggested we are looking for multiple sets of skills (with others mentioned) that have different centers: we want someone with strong interpersonal skills & intellectual skills. Or responses could be organized as different aspects of ministry.

Soft Skills/Pastoral Minister

- Empathy
- Compassion
- Pastoral care
- Boundaries and ethics

- Challenging
- Good speaker/sermon

Community Minister

- Social justice/climate justice
- Represent us at events
- Connect with other clergy/organizations

Pulpit Minister

- Inspiring

