

The Present and Future of the Unificationist Sunday Service

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<http://thankyou4asking.wordpress.com/>

My husband and I were empty nesters when we realized that our expectations and needs were no longer being met by the weekly Sunday service. We were newcomers to Europe, having spent 12 years in Korea, but we'd been feeling the same there, too. An idea whose time has come, mixed with the need to become an agent of change, plus the prospect of a long, dark Belgian winter — these are what propelled me in fall 2013 to begin a survey that became a labor of love, and helped me identify what was missing, and what I could do about it.

I set about asking Unificationists in various parts of the world, *“What is the format of your service, what inspires you, and what would you change if you could?”* I realized quickly that many were also longing for a more authentic spiritual experience. The responses I received were thoughtful and honest and I think they deserve to be shared with the wider Unification community and beyond.

The process



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My instincts told me to avoid using SurveyMonkey and make personal contact with each person instead. I sent a private Facebook message to 930 people from September through November 2013. I was blocked three times, and Facebook eventually threatened to shut me down permanently, which halted the surveying stage and kick-started me into the data-coding process.

By that time I had collected 350 responses — two-thirds from the 50+ age group, and 103 from second gen. Meant to take the temperature of the average Unificationist, this grassroots survey focused primarily on people who are not in leadership positions. They came from 195 cities around the world — 38 states in the U.S. and 32 countries worldwide. Because so many thanked me for asking them, I called it theThankyou4asking!

[<http://www.thankyou4asking.wordpress.com/>] project.

The Results

The threads running through the responses fall roughly into five categories:

1. The Service: goal and format;
2. The Sermon: length and content;
3. Worship: the importance of music, praise and prayer;
4. Community Building: testimony, fellowship, member care, contribution, small group;
5. The Second Gen: their needs, importance and value to the community.

Below is a highlight from each section, with a link to its respective page. To get the full flavor of this survey, however, I suggest taking an hour or two to read through the responses themselves. I was inspired

especially by those of the second gen. The city or country where they attend a service is indicated, but for privacy's sake, personal identifying information has been omitted.

Service

The Sunday service is the primary weekly gathering in the Unificationist community. I found that almost 25% of the respondents had dropped out and no longer attend. Of those who do attend, 70% said they are uninspired and come out of duty or only for social reasons. An example:

“Many of us are in the process of dealing with the fact that the service is not very stimulating or facilitating of growth, and/or doesn't answer some of the pressing questions we have. For those who have stopped coming or come very seldom, often the case is that they have made choices they fear they would be judged for.” – A second gen respondent



Three hot topics that emerged were:

- **Is the service guest friendly?** Very few communities reported that their service is for both members *and*

“I've always thought about bringing friends from work to church, but every week I'm so grateful I didn't.” – Second gen

- **Are we a church or movement?** *“I didn't join this movement because I was looking for a church.”* – First gen

“I sort of exist under a conflict of ideals being a Unificationist and going to church. I don't see 'unifying all religions' being achieved through separating myself with another church.” — Second gen

- **What is the role of women?** *“Gender equality is a centrally missing piece in our movement in its attempt to live by the Principle of Creation. And the core of gender equality is to come to know the Heart of God in Her femininity.”* – First gen

These are ongoing discussions that, with more input from the grassroots, will help us to go forward into a more stable future.

Sermon

The majority of respondents expressed a desire for more uplifting and applicable sermon content, and said they prefer a short, concise sermon of 20 to 30 minutes, and rotating speakers.

“I love the music and cherish the fellowship, but I'm allergic to the sermon.” – First gen

“A more personal sermon, the reverend allowing him/herself to be intimate with the congregation — that would keep me coming back.” — Second gen

Worship is about giving time for praise and thanks, and for communion with God. Not everybody wants to jump up and down, but everybody wants to feel alive.

“The question is always how can we bring the living God to church? We need a real revival.” –First gen

“Praise, exultation; singing and dancing — they're all part of worship. We don't do that much. Our kids come mainly to socialize. The point is to greet and spend real time together, loving God — and then

socialize.” – First gen

Community Building

The greatest resource in any community is its people. Many respondents said that testimonies are the most inspiring part of the service, and that fellowship keeps them coming back. Although the small group model is used by many successful churches to build deeper spiritual community, only a few Unificationists surveyed participate in one.

“I would love to see our community grow to be more personal with one another. There are so many aunts and uncles I see that I never talk to or that never talk to me...” — Second gen

Second Gen

In general, they are struggling to find themselves, and searching for what could be called a new, more practical application of the truth. They want to be noticed and spoken to, not as second gen, but as people, and they want to have a voice.



“For many of us second gen it’s frustrating because if we do anything churchy we’re hailed a saint. This is annoying and stressful, where we feel we can’t be who we truly are. At the opposite end of the spectrum, often we’re treated as if we don’t know anything and must be instructed to be proper. Appreciating God in people, and how that may be different from our understanding, is key to creating a loving community.” — Second gen

Some Conclusions

1. The social aspect of a church community is a large part of what keeps people coming back.
2. Many respondents said they hadn’t shared their thoughts and insights with their pastor. Without a forum for discussion and honest feedback, the likelihood of empowerment, growth and development is small.
3. People tend to think the leader is responsible for making changes and seeing to it that everything works. But the responses showed that contribution makes people feel more ownership, connects them together, and multiplies creative energy.

“There wasn’t much I liked about Sunday service at all. This inspired me to get involved and help develop a music ministry. That has developed into collaboration with the pastor to make the service more embracing, enchanting and inspiring.” — First gen

Some of the best practices mentioned were rotating the speakers, keeping the sermon personal and under 30 minutes, allowing time for testimonies, and having a monthly youth service. Though there were varied opinions about the best kind of music, everyone agreed that music plays a vital role in the service, and needs to be good.

Final Remarks

This survey was an exercise in listening to and gathering facts from Unificationists about their Sunday service experiences, and giving the silent majority — the disenchanted 70% — a place to be heard. As a result, although the format of our service in Belgium hasn’t changed, I have. I give testimonies and offer my music more often, cross the room more to talk to people I don’t know, invite myself to visit people in their homes, and ask what inspires them. Contributing more and complaining less feels better.

Transition times challenge us to rethink and recreate ourselves and our institutions. I don’t know what our future services will look like, but I hope they will be more engaging. When enough people start leaning in together, a tipping point is reached and change becomes inevitable. In the words of Vietnamese monk and poet, Thich Nhat Hanh, “The forms of Buddhism must change so that the essence of Buddhism remains

unchanged.” I would wholeheartedly agree.

Resources:

The Thankyou4asking! website, PowerPoint, and additional links.
[<http://thankyou4asking.wordpress.com/>]

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[<http://teatalksrobin.wordpress.com/category/the-life-story-project/>]*