

Church of Universal Fellowship
82 Main Street, Orono, ME 04473
www.churchofuniversalfellowship.org

Prospectus

Who we are

The Church of Universal Fellowship (CUF) was formed in 1941 as the result of a merger of a Universalist and a non-denominational Protestant church with Congregationalist roots. They moved into the classic 1844 New England white-clapboard, steepled building of the Universalist church on Main Street. Seventy-five plus years later our church retains those characteristics including the building. At this point the church is proudly non-denominational – surveys show that the congregation feels very strongly about remaining non-creedal and generally maintaining the ability to think and act independently. We have about 200 members and friends and services range from about 70-120 with 10-25 children during the school year

The process

We conducted a survey of our congregation with 76 people responding. We also conducted a one-hour “congregational conversation” one recent Sunday with 70 people participating. The survey results and the compiled comments from the congregational conversation inform the rest of our prospectus.

CUF demographics

Demographically, we have a surprisingly even representation across age groups from 0-80 with only a dip in size among those in their 20s and 30s. Our income distribution is typical of Northern Maine – with a median household income of about \$75-\$100,000 per family but a great deal of diversity. Our membership skews heavily to service professions including education, the ministry, medical and the arts. As a college town we do have a much higher number of members with advanced degrees than the national average (masters and doctorates make up 44% of the congregation), but we do draw from the full range of education and socio-economic levels.

Congregational is the most common denomination that people feel has been important to them in the past with Unitarian-Universalist a close second. But we have representation from all major protestant denominations including Methodist, Episcopal, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Lutheran as well as Catholic and evangelical. Twenty-seven people also selected Buddhism, Native-American or Earth-centered religion as important to them as well. Like much of Maine,

our diversity comes more in socio-economic background than race, although many members wish we were more racially diverse. We have about 11% of our congregation who identifies as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (most of whom are comfortably “out” in the congregation) and a few individuals who do not identify as cis-gender. The whole congregation remains strongly committed to maintaining our status as an “open-and-affirming” church and sees this as a core part of our identity.

Theologically our membership sees itself as roughly progressively Christian, but feels very strongly that we want to support individuals in questioning and traveling their own journey with a fairly diverse set of views represented. A majority believe a personal relationship with God is important to them, but we have a healthy contingent of agnostics and a few atheists. About two-thirds find Jesus to be inspiring about how to live a better life but are fairly diverse and evenly balanced in whether they believe in his divinity and resurrection as literal truth or not.

The Bible is frequently referenced in our services (our current minister is a lectionary preacher who preaches on the Gospel text every week), but most people view it in a mythopoetic fashion (collection of inspiring stories) and feel neutral to moderately favorable on using the Bible as inspiration for how to live. Many also want to hear texts from great literature and three-quarters have interest in varying levels of use of texts and practices from other world religions.

There is also much appreciation for the current meditative moments in the service and may be room for more. Singing hymns together is very important, with interest both in singing more of the traditional hymns and searching out newer hymns. Reading from the Gospel is appreciated by a majority of the congregation with an overall favorable definitely more neutral view of readings from the Hebrew Bible and non-Gospel New Testament. Coffee hour and the community that develops there (and on occasional after-the-service meals) is highly valued.

Our biggest “controversies” are around the frequency of communion and what version of the Lord’s Prayer we use. These topics show up only in a survey or one-on-one conversations. They don’t represent topics that are frequently debated or arouse passionate discussions. About 60% of the congregation likes having communion several times a year (as we do currently) while 25% would like to see it monthly or even weekly with the rest wanting to see it less frequently. Our current practice is to rotate interpretations of the Lord’s Prayer that we read throughout the year. About two-thirds of the congregation prefers this, but about one-quarter of the congregation would prefer to stick with the traditional King James version year round. Forty percent feel strongly about using gender neutral language or a mixture of genders in referring to God, while most of the rest of the congregation are neutral on this topic.

Who we are looking for

We are looking for a minister who will be strong at and devoted to the two “P’s”- preaching and pastoral care. When looking at different parts of the service, by far the most important parts identified by members in the survey are the “Time for All Ages” (children’s time) and the pastoral prayer and sermon. Members want sermons to be intellectually stimulating and

challenging, inspiring, and lead to self-reflection and action. Sermons may address the Bible (especially if they provide historical and linguistic context) and address current events and the state of society (although political commentary is preferred to be somewhat indirect), but need not do this every Sunday.

On a personal level the congregation wants a minister who is warm and welcoming, and will take the time to know each member of the church as an individual. Greeting members as they leave the sanctuary for coffee hour and then being an active participant in coffee hour is expected. Empathy and communication skills were listed as the two most important attributes. Open-mindedness, intellectual rigor, and strong moral character were next on the list. A collaborative and inclusive style is important. Humor and humility are always a plus. A sense of social activism is also highly valued. It is vital that the minister enjoys children and makes young (sometimes questioning and boisterous) children feel welcome in the part of the service they attend.

In summary, we are not looking for a minister to come in and change or redirect (although we fully recognize and are open to the fact that our new minister will be different from our old minister and will bring new strengths and opportunities). We mostly want a minister who is capable of and enthusiastic about the preaching (including children's time) and pastoral care components of the job, and who will have a collaborative style and who engages with all of us as individuals.

The future

Although the congregation expressed strong satisfaction with the status and direction of the church, we did identify a few challenges and opportunities for the future through our discernment process. The congregation currently shows good age balance, but we have lost a large number of elderly long-standing members in the past 5 years. We have had to process this emotionally, especially as congregation members often express that one of the things they value most about the church is that it feels like a large, intergenerational family. We have seen enough growth in new members that this has not led to a declining membership. But it does bring practical challenges. New members are needing to step up to volunteer roles (e.g. ushers, trustees, deacons).

Similarly, since long standing members typically give larger pledges than new members, this has placed downward pressure on our pledge totals. Twice in the last five years we have had to have candid conversations about how much it costs to run a church and asked members to increase their pledges if they want to maintain programming at current levels. Both times they have risen to the occasion. A number of members commented on this budgetary challenge in our surveys, and it is real and ongoing. But we also are aware of the larger trends and financial challenges faced by many mainline Protestant churches. We feel blessed that so far we have been able to meet our full budget needs (including a full time minister, 10 paid staff, and upkeep of the building) with the generosity of our members supplemented by some rental income and a sustainable take from our endowment.

One opportunity for new programming that members identified include finding a way to have better outreach to the college students that are 1.5 miles away (and more generally people in their 20s and 30s is the most obvious gap in our intergenerational family). Another opportunity is for more hands-on service to our community (especially for adults, the youth are already strongly engaged in this).

The job

We seek a full-time minister. We will pay a competitive salary and benefits package. We do not have a parish house but a living allowance is possible. We are flexible in terms of how salary and benefits are structured to meet the needs of the minister. Vacation time is also negotiable.

The minister will coordinate with the trustees on financial, staff and property matters. The minister will coordinate with the Deacons in organizing the service and spiritual formation (children and adult education). We have been lucky to have strong lay leadership and seek a minister who will collaborate closely with the lay leadership. The minister will coordinate and lead 10 part-time, paid staff. These include an administrative assistant, book-keeper, sextant, communications (social media) director, religious education director, a pair of youth (high school) group leaders, a nursery attendant, an organist, a choir director, and a hand-bell director.

All of our staff are strong in their functions and work collaboratively. Music is important to the congregation and we are fortunate to have two members of the music faculty at the university serve as organist and choir director. Similarly, the youth and religious education staff are experienced and appreciated. We hope the minister will work closely with these staff and provide vision and collaboration, but the minister need not feel as if she/he has to take primary responsibility for delivering these functions.

In addition to Sunday services we have traditionally held special services on All-Saint's Day, Christmas Eve (two services, children and adult) and several additional services during Easter week. Adult education occurs after the service and is led by the Deacons. We have a very diverse set of programs for the congregation (e.g. book club, movie night, meditation, Pilates) and additionally make sure our building is used as a resource by the community. Thus there are many events going on during the week.

We do hope the minister will choose to engage with some of these activities but do not expect participation in every event. The trustees normally meet after the service one Sunday a month. The Deacons meet in the evenings every six weeks. We do expect the minister to attend these meetings most of the time.

The town

Orono is a fairly typical small New England town with the addition of being the home of Maine's largest university. The listed population of Orono is about 10,000, but at least half of those are university students. We are the kind of town where most people know most other people, and everyone takes care of each other.

The University of Maine provides a variety of cultural events, seminars and film series, including the Collins Center for the Performing Arts which hosts internationally known touring concerts, plays, musicals and more. We function as a suburb of Bangor which commercially services most of Northern Maine and even some of Canada. As a result there are excellent medical care, professional services, shopping opportunities, and a professional orchestra and theater company. Bangor also hosts an annual folk festival and a series of concerts by national artists on its riverfront.

Orono has a great deal of land set aside in land trust with extensive trail networks (walking, running, mountain biking, cross-country skiing) and a river running through the heart of town for canoeing and kayaking. Outdoor opportunities abound in and around Orono. We are an hour from the coast and from Maine's ski regions. We have excellent schools and a great library. The town supports a walkable life style, making it attractive to families with young children as well as retirees.