



# ASSESSMENT: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## The Federated Church of Chagrin Falls

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CONVERGENCE

## Findings

Federated UCC has approximately 1600 people who participate in some way in the life of the community. The number of people engaged in some way with the congregation has decreased from 2200 five years ago to 1606 today, a sign the congregation has experienced a slight decline in recent years. The weekly in-person attendance was decreasing over time prior to the pandemic, from 358 in attendance five years ago to 258 in 2019. Over 70% of survey respondents believe the congregation is shrinking.

Your church's current congregation skews older but is diverse in age, with 17% under 18, 35% working age adults, and 39% of the congregation over 65. The majority, or 63%, live within 5 miles of the church, while 25% of respondents live over 6 miles away and 11% over 10 miles away, representing a somewhat geographically dispersed membership.

Only 55% of survey respondents are excited about where the church is headed. This leaves 45% who do not share that excitement, indicating some diversity in perceptions of the future of Federated UCC.

The current church budget is \$1,220,000 per year. The tithes and offerings for the most recent fiscal year were \$1,115,600. This indicates a significant gap of \$104,400 between giving and budget.

Federated UCC has facilities that are an appropriate size for the congregation and for their ministries, and in adequate to excellent condition according to the pastor and congregational surveys. Your congregation is currently in discernment about the best uses and strategies for your Family Life Center and the two Bell Street buildings in the face of their costs and changes in building use that may persist into the future due to the pandemic.

Federated UCC engages in your community in several ways. Your leader survey indicates the top priorities for the church in the community are your Open and Affirming stance toward LGBTQ people, your willingness to engage issues of racism, and your service to families, children, and youth. Your pastor reports that around 40% of the congregation took part in some action during the past year relating to these priorities.

Your neighborhood is slightly diverse, with 5% identifying as Black/African American, 88% as White, 4% as Asian, and 1% as Pacific Islander, American Indian or Other, and 1% as Latino. This is much more racially diverse than your congregation. The population in your area is staying about the same in size and slowly increasing in average age. Two age groups are growing in addition to those over 65. Singles and young families are expected to increase their numbers by 6% over the next 10 years, while preschool aged children are expected to increase by 2% over the next 10 years.

## Recommendations

### Congregational Care

**Get people busy doing ministry that makes real impact in your community.**

Younger generations have a clear desire, backed by years of behavioral data, to engage in service and justice work. They may not wake up on a Sunday and say, “I wish I could go sit in a pew and listen to a lecture about God for a few hours today.” But they often share a deep desire to help their neighbors, meet new friends, feel less lonely, find support in their work and family life, and serve those in need. Perhaps the great challenge that we must overcome together is the idea that Sunday morning is still the “Front Door” experience of congregational life. What if that paradigm is flipped on its head? What if your justice ministries, small groups, support groups and community events are the first places that people connect with Federated Church? These are your new front doors, with the hope that the worship experience on Sundays become the second space people find comfort and connection. Our strong recommendation is that you double down on the opportunities for people to be in an active ministry. Throughout the interviews, Rev. Trimble noted that the single most often mentioned ministry was SJAM, mentioned because it gave the interviewee such a sense of personal fulfillment and alignment with their understanding of Christian call.

**Strengthen opportunities for collective connection.**

Sociologist Margaret Wheatley concluded that our world today is functioning like a centrifuge. It is separating particles intended to be together, separating them by the force of speed so that the relational fabric of our communities is being torn apart by our pace of development. In the face of financial meltdown, climate breakdown, COVID lockdown, racial throwdown, and political letdown, we are losing ourselves and each other. In many of the interviews with members of the church, they spoke of their loneliness and their sense of disconnection from their friends and church. While that is certainly a byproduct of our social distancing, it speaks to what will be a growing need in our wider community. We need connection to one another. In this age of unprecedented stress, the care we give one another as members of a congregation has never been more important. The good news is that now we have more ways of doing that than ever before. Online church is here to stay, and we would strongly encourage you all to continue developing your presence online with strategic investments in building *community* with those who engage you in this way. While we would give this advice to any congregation right now, we specifically highlight it for your attention because the need for connection was a consistent theme in the interviews.



## Community Engagement

### **Cultivate strategic partnerships with the larger community.**

In the interviews with community leaders and congregation members, a number of people mentioned a time in the past when the leadership of Federated Church, both lay and ordained, were seen as influential leaders for the community. They spoke nostalgically of the role the church has played in the past. We are not suggesting that we go back to a time that no longer exists. We are suggesting that there is growing opportunity to once again become strategic influencers as community leaders in this age. Many of the challenges facing the community would benefit from leadership offered by members of Federated Church. In conversations with Village Council Members, they voiced a desire for increased collaboration. This said, some of you may say, “But we do have great relationships in the community!” What the data and interviews showed was that, if that is the case, the wider congregation is not aware of them or involved with them. That could be a place of opportunity.

## Spiritual Deepening

### **Create opportunities for connections to God.**

Author and historian, Diana Butler Bass, points out that Mainline Christianity was built on a model of “Believe, Behave, Belong.” She says, “This is because traditional Christianity focuses on the prescriptions: What to believe, How to behave, and Who you are. With spirituality, on the other hand, people experience a connection to the divine directly and through community and are moved to change and serve others, and ultimately discover what they believe.” Justice activities and small groups are our most generative spaces for early connections with new people because they experience the Good News in an incarnational way - through action and service. That said, what people most long for is a sense of intimacy and connection to God. I (Cameron) continue to reflect on the insight of 20th-century theologian Karl Rahner who once famously remarked that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or . . . will not exist at all.”

## Financial Sustainability

### **Improve your financial sustainability through attention to giving and buildings.**

You have a significant gap between giving and budget. You have a large staff for your church size. Salaries are a large part of your budget and without cutbacks, likely increase year over year due to benefit and cost-of-living increases. To meet the current and future budget obligations, current members and friends will need to give, or give at higher levels, as they may have done in the past, or the church will need additional people willing to invest in the life of your church and ministry. The



leadership of the church has already invested significant time discerning a faithful use of the Family Life Center, with so much about buildings on pause due to the pandemic. As we reopen physical spaces this year, continue in that faithful discernment and be ready to pivot so that all building usage is sustainable and reflects your congregation's mission in the world.

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For follow up questions, email us at [info@convergenceus.org](mailto:info@convergenceus.org).

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