

First U Focus Groups - Summary of Notes – Fall 2025

Executive Summary

The twelve focus groups—representing nearly every segment of the congregation—expressed strong pride in First Unitarian Toronto’s values, resilience, and history of lay leadership. Across all groups, participants voiced both optimism and fatigue after years of transition, a deep desire for reconnection, and clear hopes for a new minister who will bring spiritual depth, stability, humility, and collaborative leadership.

The overarching message: the next minister must lead through partnership, balancing inspiration with practical competence, and grounding renewal in an authentic relationship and shared purpose.

Cross-Cutting Themes

1. Congregations’ Strengths and Identity

- Dedicated, skilled volunteers and staff.
- Rich music and worship life.
- Strong social justice commitment.
- Resilience through disruption.
- Deep tradition of lay governance.
- Beautiful “new” building

2. Congregation’s Challenges and Hidden Issues

- Volunteer fatigue and limited capacity.
- Erosion of engagement post-pandemic.
- Communication gaps between leadership bodies.
- Generational imbalance (few young families).
- Financial fragility and need for sustainable growth.
- Desire for culturally sensitive, Canadian-aware leadership.
- Emotional exhaustion and need for healing.

3. Hopes and Qualities Desired in the Next Minister

- Emotionally mature, grounded, compassionate, and self-aware.
- Approachable, authentic, and joyful.
- Excellent preacher and communicator.
- Collaborative and team-oriented leader.
- Compassionate pastoral presence
- Bridge-builder, conflict mediator, and community connector.
- Organizer and team-builder focused on youth and families.
- Long-term commitment with understanding of the Canadian UU context.
- Able to challenge the Congregation to stretch and grow

4. Ministerial Pitfalls (Derailers)

- Authoritarian or dismissive style.
- Disrespect for lay leadership or staff.
- Over-Christianized worship in a pluralistic setting.
- Partisan or divisive preaching.
- U.S. centric assumptions or tone.
- Disorganization or inconsistency.
- Lack of pastoral care or personal connection.

Overall Conclusion

First Unitarian Toronto stands at a pivotal point: newly housed, post-pandemic, and eager for renewal. The next minister will inherit a congregation that is wise, self-aware, and ready to grow — but also weary and in need of healing.

Success will depend on cultivating trust, joy, and shared purpose through partnership, not authority. The ideal minister will hold the centre with humility and hope — balancing heart, intellect, and presence — enabling the congregation to reconnect and rebuild for a strong future.