

Inquiry into University Congregational United Church of Christ's Work Environment: Report by the Personnel Committee Summary for the Congregation

Introduction

On July 17, 2022, church staff noticed some writing on the in-and-out board in the church office. Several employees' names were written by someone, along with some derogatory racial or ethnic identity words. The congregation was notified of the incident via email on August 8, 2022.

[Note: in this document we refer to the term BIPOC which means Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color. "People Of Color" refers to Asian, Pacific Islander, Hispanic or mixed race.]

The church's Personnel Committee initiated an inquiry into this incident. After conferring with the church's racial justice consultants, the Personnel Committee decided to expand the focus of the inquiry to include an evaluation of the church's wider work environment. The purpose of the inquiry was to support a discrimination-free workplace at UCUC. It was also in keeping with the church's racial justice resolution adopted in August of 2019 ([Racial-Justice-Resolution.pdf \(universityucc.org\)](#)) which in part stated a commitment to "Developing benchmarks within our ... employment practices ... to eradicate racism and promote more inclusive practices."

The inquiry was carried out by a subcommittee via a series of individual conversations with church staff in the Winter/Spring of 2023. Eighteen staff members were invited to meet with the Team. The majority of church employees (17) agreed to participate. This document is a summary of the inquiry's findings and recommendations. The Personnel Committee's full report to the Church Council can be found at ([Link](#))

The July 2022 incident itself.

Despite extensive questions about the discovery and timing of the incident the Personnel Committee was not able to identify the person(s) who defaced the office white board in July 2022. The most helpful part of the inquiry was its second purpose: learning about the general work environment at the church.

Findings about the general work environment, primarily around race

- Staff perspectives varied, based on their racialized experience of the church, as well as the length of time they had been with the church and/or in the church community.

Those who had been involved in the church community for a significant number of years were much more likely to have a positive experience of the church as a welcoming, discrimination- and harassment-free workplace than those who were newer to the community.

- Altogether, about half of the six BIPOC employees expressed concerns about how they have been treated based on their race.
- While many of the White staff may have noted that they had experienced a primarily welcoming environment, many also were very aware that it was coming from their lens as a White staff person. Many White staff also commented that while we are working towards becoming more welcoming, we are not where we want to be for all staff, and many have seen instances of inconsiderate or biased interactions with BIPOC coworkers.
- We heard feedback around the congregation's, and sometimes staff's, struggles with "newness" – whether welcoming new people, new music, a new preaching style, new practices, or a new way of being together. One example of the impact of this is that sometimes a congregant's frustrations and adjustment to newness in the church can be taken out on office staff by being more demanding with office staff and asked them to prioritize their individual requests with a sense of urgency.
- Many staff also noted that there seems to be some tension around the racial justice focus within parts of the congregation, with some members asking, "Do we have to keep talking about race?"
- We heard varied experiences from BIPOC staff, with some noting that they felt respected and welcomed, and others noting that they did not feel welcomed at the church. Some noted the many microaggressions they have experienced as a staff member, primarily from congregants, and also acknowledged that while we may call them "micro," the impact is often much greater.
- Microaggressions can be identified as "the everyday slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, and offensive behaviors that people experience in daily interactions with generally well-intentioned individuals who may be unaware that they have engaged in demeaning ways." Some examples we heard as having been experienced at UCUC include:
 - Touching hair and commenting on hair and clothing.
 - Approaching a BIPOC staff member as if they are "the help", rather than a staff member hired by the church and part of the community.
 - Having to edit Church & Home article or web entry language to remove microaggressions.
 - Stumbling over foreign-sounding names and making jokes about it.
 - Framing things from a White perspective and saying, "we need to work on this" when you mean "White people need to work on this."
 - Asking a BIPOC staff member "where are you from?"

- Being surprised that someone who speaks English as a second language can speak articulately.
 - Interrogating a BIPOC staff member on their faith background and how they grew up, outside of a traditional interview.
 - Speaking in a condescending manner about the country of origin of a staff member.
 - Judging BIPOC staff member's performance by a different standard than White employees or former employees.
 - Confusing BIPOC employees with one another or misnaming someone.
 - A White congregant telling a BIPOC staff member what the staff member's "real" ethnic identity was.
 - Asking a BIPOC staff member to speak for and represent every person in their racial identity (ex. What do Black people think about this?).
 - Remarks on accents.
 - Putting articles and books in mailboxes of a BIPOC staff member based on what is assumed about their identity.
- Several items are important to point out. First, none of the staff implied that these interactions were intended to be hurtful. And these types of incidents were not reported by all BIPOC staff. And certainly no one expressed that they experienced these types of interactions at all times from all congregants. However, the Personnel Committee determined that the reports of these interactions were prevalent enough and of sufficient impact (even in the absence of intent) to constitute a workplace issue that is important for the church to address – both as an employer and as a caring community.
 - We learned that staff are open to talking about microaggressions as a group but it's less clear what to do about them, especially when they come from congregants.
 - Beyond the focus of the church as an employer, some staff expressed concern around the experience of BIPOC congregants in the church.

Other findings about the general work environment

- A few staff reported experiencing ageism, in particular where their expertise is not always trusted by congregants, especially when they are trying something new.
- Several staff noted the gendered expectations of staff – from the outdated view of the role of secretary, to mansplaining, to the female-gendered expectations of being nurturing and maternal while also being asked not to bring family concerns into the workplace.

- Several staff noted the progress the congregation and staff have made in using the preferred pronouns for members of our community. There was also an acknowledgement that the church is often more welcoming to non-binary gender identity than to race and culture.
- We did not hear many comments related to sexual orientation but did hear a comment from staff that they had not experienced homophobia.
- The Committee heard mostly positive feedback around raising concerns with supervisors when a staff member had a concern.
- Some BIPOC staff did note that in taking steps to address these microaggressions in the past, they were minimized by their supervisor or other staff. One other staff member noted instances where they had named an issue and requested action, it needed to be raised several times to get to resolution.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback received, the Personnel Committee proposed the following major recommendations which were adopted by the Church Council at its September 20, 2023, meeting:

1. The Church Council reaffirmed the goal of making the church an inclusive and affirming workplace for all identities, beyond its legal obligation to be a discrimination-free employer.
2. The Personnel Committee was directed to develop options for a structure for addressing microaggressions from congregants toward staff – sort of like an ombudsperson or a structure similar to the church’s existing Leadership/Parish Relations Committee which deals with clergy/congregant relations. As part of this, they will consult with the Racial Justice Committee and the church’s racial justice consultants.
3. The Personnel Committee was directed to create a summary of the findings and recommendations of this report and a link to the full report, to be shared with the congregation (after first sharing the report with staff). This has been done with the issuance of this summary report.
4. The Church Council will consider whether or not to carry out a similar effort focused on the experience of UCUCB BIPOC congregants, at this time.

The Personnel Committee thanks all staff that shared their perspectives with us. Likewise, we thank all members of the congregation that join us in our efforts to make UCUC a welcoming workplace. If you have any questions about this report, please feel free to follow up with Tim Croll at timcroll@hotmail.com.