

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

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. This incident was discussed among staff and church leadership, and the congregation was notified via email on August 8, 2022.

The church's Personnel Committee initiated an inquiry into this incident, as required by Section 13 B of the church's Personnel Handbook. 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.

The inquiry was carried out by a subcommittee (Inquiry Team). The Inquiry Team conducted 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 and were representative in terms of gender and race/ethnicity.

The Inquiry Team started each conversation by recapping 1) their commitment to protect the confidentiality of the source of any information that would be shared as a result of the inquiry and 2) the church's policy of non-retaliation for employees who shared information during the inquiry.

This document is the report of the results of the findings of these conversations and the recommendations arising from these findings. The Personnel Committee wants to express its appreciation to all employees whose participation helped us continue our work toward making UCUC a discrimination-free workplace and to all employees that in general do, and have done, so much over the years to support the work of the church.

July 2022 Incident – What we learned.

Four staff members saw the writing on the white board – three women and one man. This occurred on Sunday morning around 9 a.m. Due to the shock of seeing what was written on the board, a supervisor immediately instructed that the writing be erased. The only report of the incident exists in written form and was documented by the Director of Operations.

Staff were told about the discovery, but not the specifics of what was written on the board, the following week via their Zoom staff meeting. The staff meeting broke into racial caucuses, one for White staff and one for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) staff so they could discuss and process the impact of, and their response

to, the incident. Not all staff were in the staff meeting due to leave or work schedules that did not align with the staff meeting date. Aside from the four staff members who saw the original writing, no one else on staff had first-hand knowledge of the incident. Many heard of the incident for the first time in the staff meeting or by word-of-mouth after they returned from vacation or their days off, or after they started their work with the church.

We were told that the white board had not been used since February 2020. Staff were not regularly in the building until late in 2021, and then on irregular schedules. Keys to the office are widely circulated among staff members and congregants who have a need to access the office. It was also commented that keys may be so widely circulated that we do not have a good understanding of who does, and does not, have access.

Further conversation revealed that there have been gang tags and various graffiti found on exterior walls and fences of the church. Staff have occasionally noticed words and images on the white board in the conference room adjacent to the office. These words and images were described as amateur pornography.

The Inquiry Team has not been able to identify the person(s) who defaced the office white board in July 2022. The team has not been able to determine the precise time the defilement took place. We have heard differing reflections from staff members – both White staff members and BIPOC staff members – on their response and feelings about the incident. Some staff members were surprised at the directness and targeted nature of the language given the Pacific Northwest typical attitudes of passivity. Some also reflected that this incident, while deeply troubling, may finally cause the congregation to take the experiences of BIPOC staff and congregants seriously and realize that they are not overreacting.

The general work environment

Going into this inquiry process, the Inquiry Team suspected that this incident may reflect the broader work environment in our church. As part of our inquiry conversations, we asked staff questions about the broader work environment to learn more and inform recommendations that can support our steps toward a discrimination-free workplace at UCUC.

In summarizing feedback below, the Inquiry Team worked to capture the nuance of the different staff perspectives that were shared. It is important to note that staff perspectives were different, both in their own racialized experience of the church, and the length of time they had been with the church and/or in the church community. At a high level, 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 welcoming, discrimination & harassment-free workplace than those who were newer to the community. Altogether, about half of the BIPOC employees expressed concerns about how they have been treated based on their race. Also, 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 disparate treatment of BIPOC coworkers.

Congregational response to “newness”

In listening to feedback from staff, the Inquiry Team 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.

We heard from both White and BIPOC staff that while there is an intention of wanting to be diverse, the reality coming across is more of a closed-off attitude of exclusivity that is deeply rooted in the way our church functions. While there may be a sincere attitude of racial and social justice in our intentions and the hearts of many congregants, from some staff, it did appear that we were not walking the talk, and some wondered if maybe it was that we did not know how.

Some staff also noted that there was an element in the congregation where folks reacted aggressively and critically to newness, rather than with curiosity. They noted that layered on top is a culture of conflict avoidance and naming bad practices is often not well received.

The Inquiry Team also heard reflections from many staff that a congregant’s frustrations and adjustment to newness in the church can be taken out on office staff. For example, as congregants are adjusting to the decreased availability of the office post-COVID, they have been more demanding with office staff and asked them to prioritize their requests with a sense of urgency, not taking into consideration the many requests they have on their plate.

Many staff also noted that there seems to be some tension around the racial justice focus within parts of the congregation. One staff added that we are in this moment of “Blacklash” where some in the congregation are asking “do we have to keep talking about race?”

Identities

In listening to feedback from staff, the Inquiry Team heard feedback around experiences on how they experienced the work environment in relationship to their identities, including race, gender, sex, age, and ability. While many noted that they did not believe their experiences with congregants and/or staff were intended to be harmful, they also noted the very real impact it has on their overall work experience at our church.

Race

The Committee 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. BIPOC staff who noted that they did not feel welcomed at the church, 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 are “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.”¹ Some examples shared during our conversations included:

- 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 staff member of color “where are you from?”
- Being surprised that someone who speaks English as a second language can speak articulately.
- Interrogating a staff member of color 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 people of color with one another or misnaming someone.
- A White congregant telling a 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.

BIPOC staff also noted that when their only interaction with a congregant is a person requesting to touch their hair or their clothing, they do not have the experience of developing a relationship on a human level, and more often experience being viewed as an object of curiosity, rather than a full human. Some BIPOC staff expanded on this noting that White individuals are seen as individuals in their own right, but staff of color are viewed as a group within their identity.

¹ Microaggression definition from UNC School of Medicine: <https://www.med.unc.edu/healthsciences/about-us/diversity/jeditoolkit/microaggressions-microaffirmations/>

The Inquiry Team found that while these types of incidents were not reported by all BIPOC staff, they were prevalent enough and of sufficient concern to constitute a workplace issue that is important for the church to address – both as an employer and as a caring community.

Addressing microaggressions

While the pandemic has changed things, and allowed some staff to work from home, decreasing the number of microaggressions experienced, there are also BIPOC staff who cannot always work from home. In addition, some White staff acknowledged that with the pandemic, they are now less aware of the discrimination and harassment since they are not in the building.

White staff acknowledged in their reflections that it takes privilege to interrupt microaggressions, and many reflected on ways they were working to identify microaggressions and interrupt them. Some staff commented that it would be helpful to have specific training for staff on the topic of microaggressions to continue their own education.

There was also acknowledgement in the interviews that staff are open to talking about microaggressions as a group but it's less clear what to do about it, especially when it comes from congregants. Some staff noted that if someone harms you as a volunteer, you don't have a clear mechanism to solve this. They also noted that committees can be both supportive and problematic. Staff do a lot of work with the individuals serving on committees, but when people rotate off, it often feels like that work has to take place all over again. Finally, beyond the focus of the church as an employer, staff, especially BIPOC staff, noted concern around the experience of congregants of color in the church as well and how we are creating an environment that is truly welcoming and discrimination-free for all.

Internally, as a staff member, it was also acknowledged that it can be difficult to address microaggressions when a staff member does not have a clear supervisory structure.

Age

A few staff reported experiencing ageism, in particular where their expertise is not always trusted by congregants, especially when they are trying something new. In some cases, this was also compounded by gender. Staff have experienced occasions where congregants try to tell them how to do their job and ask "why aren't you doing it this way," even when the issue is not within the congregant's committee purview. This leads staff to feel their level of authority is questioned.

Sex

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.

Gender

There were mixed reviews from staff on whether they felt welcomed in their gender identity. 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 gender identify than to race and culture.

In interviews, a reflection was shared that the all-gender bathroom is not always respected as a bathroom for those who need it and instead used as a dressing room on Sunday mornings.

Sexual orientation

We did not hear many comments related to sexual orientation, but did hear a comment from staff that they had not experienced homophobia.

Ability

One interviewee commented that we should think about how we, as a church, are accommodating for neurodivergence in our staff roles and expectations.

Raising Concerns with a Supervisor

In listening to feedback from staff, 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 in instances where they had named an issue and requested action, there is often initial action, but it needs to be raised several times to get to resolution.

It was also brought up by staff multiple times that a church is unique due to the interaction between staff and congregants.

Recommendations

Based on the feedback received about the incident and the broader work environment during conversations with 17 staff members, the Personnel Committee proposed the following recommendations which were adopted by the Church Council at its September 20, 2023 meeting:

Major Recommendations

1. The Church Council reaffirms 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 is requested to develop options for some structure for addressing microaggressions from congregants toward staff – sort of like an ombuds or a structure similar to LPRC which deals with clergy/congregant relations. As part of this, they should consult with the Racial Justice Committee and the church’s racial justice consultants.
3. The Personnel Committee is requested to create a summary of the findings and recommendations of this report and a link to the full report, both to be shared generally with the congregation.
4. Prior to distributing this report to the congregation, the Personnel Committee is requested to make its report (including these Council actions) available to all staff.
5. The Church Council wishes to consider whether or not to carry out a similar effort focused on the experience of UCUCC BIPOC congregants at this time. The Church Council will consult with the Racial Justice Committee, the church’s racial justice consultants, and a number of BIPOC congregants about the advisability of taking this step. The Church Council may empanel a team to carry out this consultation.

Other Recommendations

6. The Personnel Committee should help the congregation get to know who the staff are and in what role they serve the church – for example by writing a staff spotlight in each issue of Church & Home, or by posting profiles on the red wall.
7. Supervisors should consult with their staff to determine what (if any) additional training in microaggressions would be helpful and provide for such training. (The Church Council could also consider making this training available also to congregant volunteers or committee members.)
8. Supervisors should coordinate with the Director of Finance and Operations to ensure that the supervisory reporting relationships of all employees and regular volunteers are clear to all (for example, with an up-to-date org chart).
9. The Facilities and Equipment Committee should consider the use of the various restrooms to ensure that an all-gender bathroom is available as much as possible when the church is open.