

UUCGL Task Force on Reimagining Our Space

In the fall of 2023 the UUGCL Board of Trustees requested that a task force be formed to gather information and suggestions from the congregation about how our building and grounds could be improved and perhaps put to better use. Michael Celona agreed to chair this task force, and Doreen Hodgkin, Francene Amari-Faulkner, Jack Butterworth, and Scott Nowka agreed to serve as members.

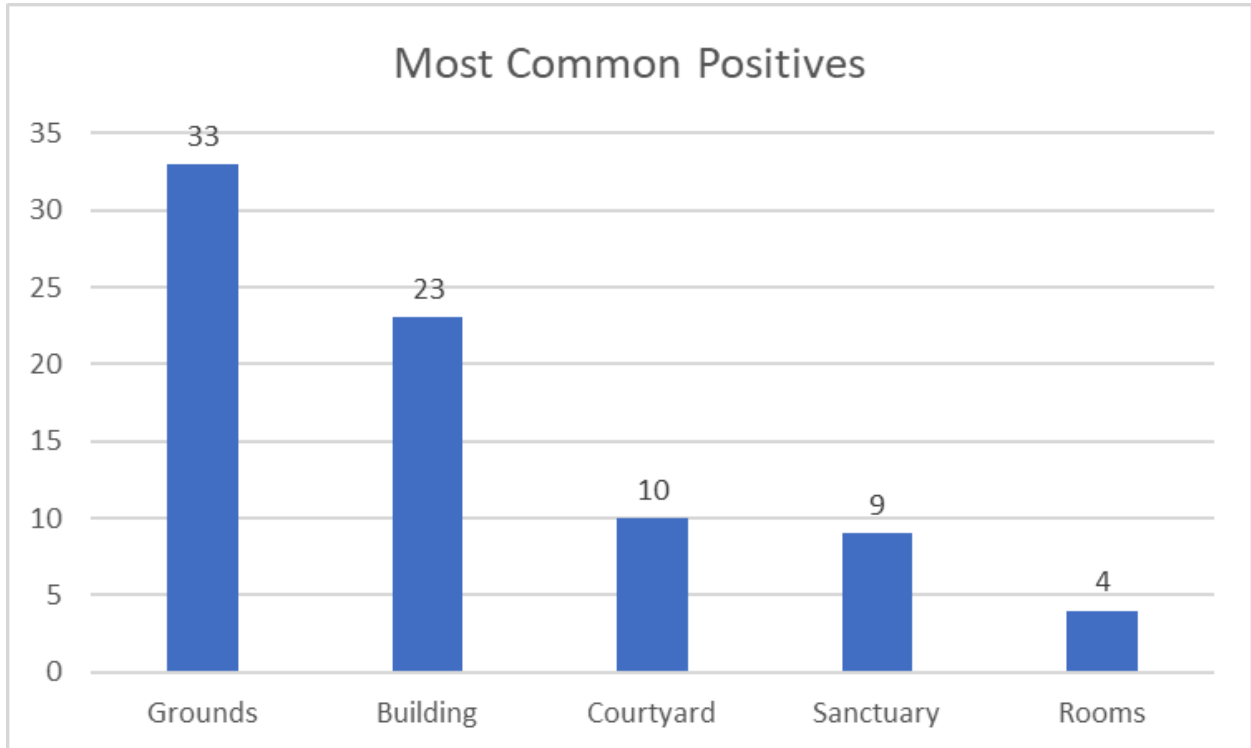
The task force drew on the following resources in making this report

- Doreen Hodgkin's familiarity with the building and grounds as a longstanding member of the Properties Committee
- Church data on building use, including church service attendance and space use by outside groups
- A survey was created and distributed to other local congregations to ask how they use their buildings and grounds.
- A survey was created and distributed to the congregation and the staff to ask what they like about our building and grounds, where they see a need for improvements, and what suggestions they have. Over 40 church members and X staff responded. The attached charts provide a brief overview of the responses.

Congregational Survey Findings

Positive Aspects of the Building and Grounds

The task force learned through our survey of the congregation that the overwhelming majority of respondents had positive feelings about our church grounds (82%) and, to a lesser extent, the church building (58%). The courtyard, the sanctuary, and the sheer number of rooms that we have were also noted by some church members as positives.



Suggestions: Church Building Improvements

Survey respondents provided a range of suggestions for improving the church building. The most frequent were:

- adding air conditioning to the sanctuary (5)
- improving the lighting in the building by replacing outdated fixtures (5)
- painting the walls (5)
- replacing outdated furniture (5)
- improving signage for directions to rooms, particularly in the foyer (5)
- Cleaning out clutter from the rooms and cabinets throughout the church (4)
- Updating the bathrooms (4)
- Improving the foyer, as many felt it was not welcoming, attractive, or effective at guiding guests to events (4)
- Updating technology in the church (4)
- Improving the basement (4)
- Improving church security (3)
- Updating the kitchen (3)
- Improving the church sound system (3)

Example Responses Around Improvements

— *“Our foyer could be so much more. It is the first impression of our church building and I think it could be made more welcoming, interesting, beautiful, and modern. It needs some serious feng shui. If there was only one room to improve, I would vote for that one. I would love to explore using dynamic digital monitors instead of archaic bulletin boards and signs on easels (yes, even the ones I myself am creating!). And we need to, once and for all, officially name and label the rooms. Then provide clear signage for navigating the building.*

The bathrooms are industrial feeling, dark, and just... ugly. Also, there's nothing designated as gender neutral.

I think our church needs simple, modular furniture in most rooms. The table in the room next to Skylight starts to do this, where it can break apart and be put together in multiple ways. But we need that for seating as well. Durable couches, chairs, and tables that match, are easily movable, and can form in to a variety of combinations for different purposes. (Note: some research has already been done for this in the Skylight room a few years ago). It would be an investment, but folding chairs and card tables aren't very impressive and really bring down the aesthetic of our nice spaces.

One more thing we can do is examine all the barely-used spaces in the church (the lower level rooms, "faces" room, the sanctuary balcony, etc.) and determine why they aren't utilized, then brainstorm what could be new uses for them. It may bring up fresh, new ideas. Perhaps we could have themed rooms for different uses (e.g.: a “tech” room for presentations and computer workspace; a “history” room with some of our archives and artifacts on display that would be a suitable meeting space for the History Team, genealogy group, etc.; a “zen” room for tai chi, tarot card gatherings, etc.; a “creativity” room for the craft group, mandala making, and Sunday School kids' projects; a funky “youth” room for teen hangouts, youth group, OWL; etc.). Or maybe each room could be dedicated/themed within a different UU principle/value... there are so many possibilities, which in and of itself would be new and exciting.”

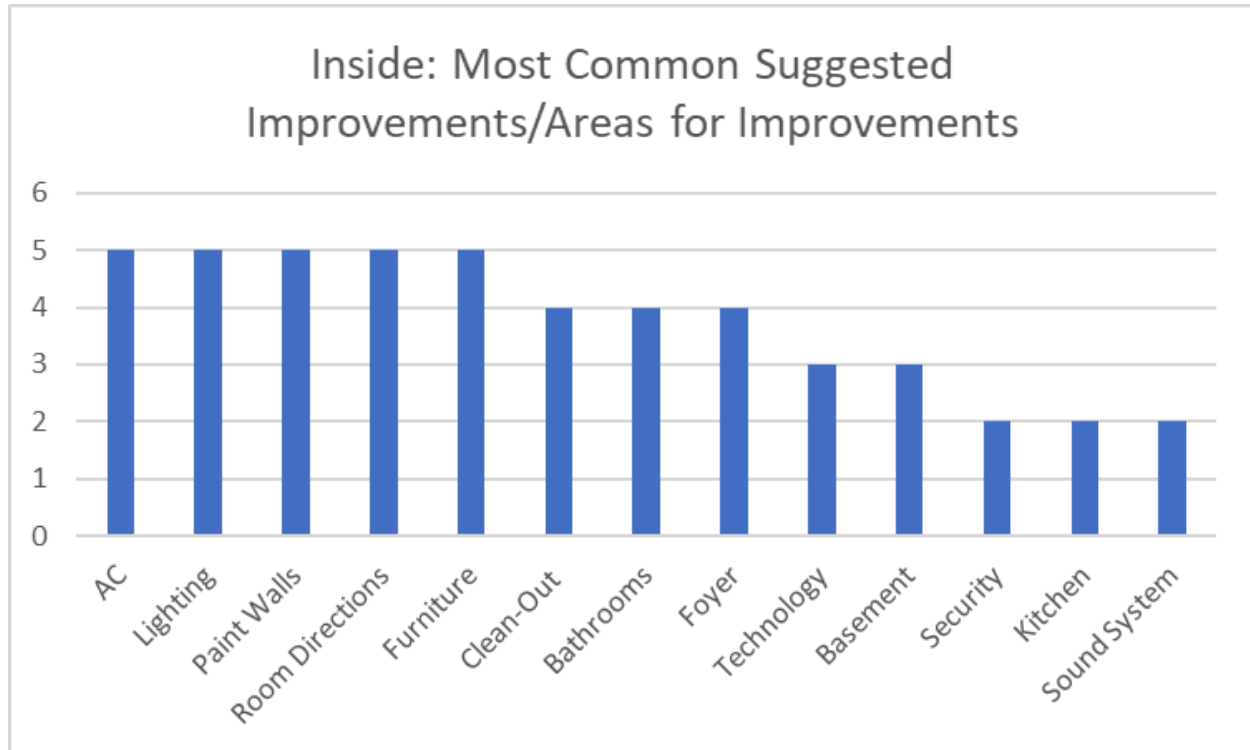
— *“The front entrance seems dull and awkward. Needs a modern update. Walls look drab (brighter white paint and artwork would help). Why us a bulletin board when there's a monitor right there where all kinds of things can be displayed? Needs a more professional/impressive welcome table as well, with printed brochures and materials.*

Overall the building seems like it could be livelier. Displaying pictures of past church activities and gatherings could help, the website pictures make us look more vibrant than the building does. The new artwork in the Parish Hall is nice and more like that would be good too, especially if made by the children.

Displaying pictures of minister, past ministers, board, and staff in the building would help connect people to leaders. With email addresses underneath.

The Fellowship Room and that room with the nice rug and green chairs (to the right of the Skylight Room) are nice places to convene, but the other rooms sorely need better furniture and tech equipment to bring them into the modern era. The Skylight Room and the one room off the lobby are two very visible, yet very shabby-looking, opportunities for improvement in the furniture department. Also we should name and label the rooms.

The lighting throughout the building seems very industrial. Need warmer lights and maybe some lamps to cozy it up.”



Suggestions: Grounds Improvements

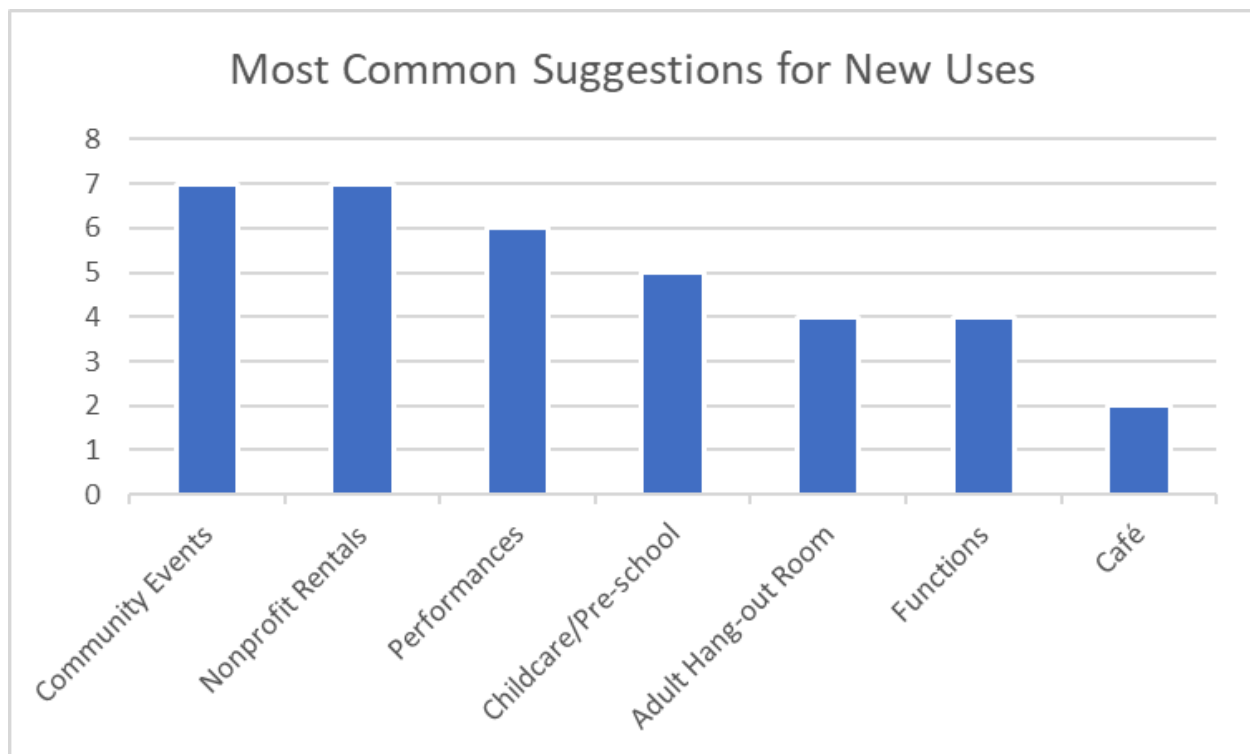
Fewer suggestions were given regarding how the grounds of the church could be improved. Both survey respondents and task force members noted that no decisions about grounds improvements could be decided upon until the new elementary school has opened and we fully understand how this will affect the traffic, parking, and aesthetics of the land around the church.

The suggestions provided included, in no order:

- Ensuring we have adequate parking after the school is completed
- Building an outdoor pavilion for events
- Building a labyrinth

Suggestions: New Uses

Respondents provided a number of creative suggestions for new uses of the building.



Example Responses Around New Uses

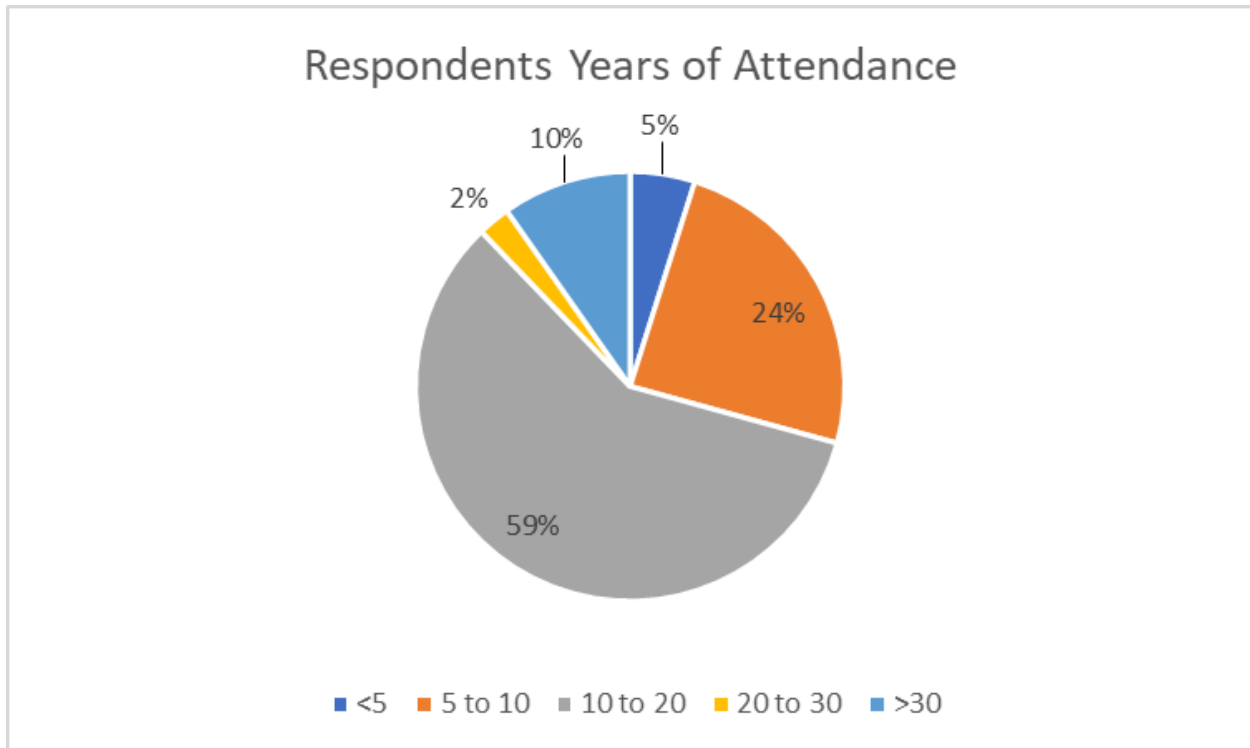
— *“Perhaps host more community meetings to increase our visibility. Big Blue Bargains (Swampscott Thrift Store - proceeds donated to Swampscott schools) is in a new location and the building is for sale. When that occurs, they will need a new home. I heard Reach Arts may not continue at their present location. They may move to virtual set up; they would need a space to hold some events. Join forces with other churches or Swampscott Acorn Food Bank and have pot-luck meals for Swampscott residents. I know we have tried to reach out to Lynn residents which is great. Make more effort to also connect with Swampscott residents since we are here. More parents will see us now as they exit the new school. How can we support local single mothers living here? Have a support group here for them with childcare and support services to help them with education and other needs. Anchor Food Pantry would know who needs more support. Many families struggle with afterschool care for their kids. Not sure what programs we could offer them. Supporting local families MAY bring more people in the door. Some of the town is wealthy; there are many families struggling financially.”*

— *“I would like to see more community meetings held in our building. For example, the groups working to clean up King's Beach (Save King's Beach, Friends of Lynn and Nahant Beaches) could meet in our building. Other non-profits could have meetings in our building. I think that would be a good way to build rapport with the surrounding communities. We could also offer our stage to theater groups and our Sanctuary to musical groups. And we could have art shows on our premises. There is no end to the possibilities!”*

We could also offer our space to local groups for conferences. We have space for large meetings and also small break-out groups.”

Respondents’ Years at UUCGL

The task force was pleased that we had broad participation in the survey from across the congregation. As demonstrated by the pie chart below, we received input from many congregants that have been with us between 10 and 20 years, but also a sizable number of newer members.



Task Force Recommendations

The charge of the task force was as follows:

Mission: Reimagine the church’s physical space (building and grounds) to nourish our congregation and support community partnerships.

Guidelines:

1. Use board committee members (Properties, Finance/Investment, etc.) and staff members as a resource for information.

2. Solicit congregational input.
3. Reach out to other New England-area churches to see if they have undergone a similar process.
4. Include recommendations for ways to make UUCGL's spaces more inviting.
5. Consider human and financial resources in their recommendations.
6. Generate a written, comprehensive set of recommendations for the board.

Overall Comments

The task force was given an ambitious charge and timeframe to implement it. We collected a lot of information from church staff, church members, other churches, and each other. After reviewing this information, we decided that we would not propose any large, sweeping changes to the church but would instead use this opportunity to recommend some initial ones. Large, sweeping changes require more significant processing with church members, staff, and others, and we felt that the church would be better served by implementing smaller changes that could become the foundation for larger ones. Therefore, these are our recommendations for initial changes.

Ways to Make UUCGL's Spaces More Inviting

In reviewing the building and grounds, as well as the survey of the congregation, the task force found that the best ways to make our spaces more inviting would be to:

- Install air conditioning in the sanctuary and the Parish Hall. The sanctuary is one of our great assets, but because it is not air conditioned we cannot hold services in it for several months a year. These are the summer months when potential new congregants are often exploring churches, and current church attendees have also stated that they would prefer summer services in the sanctuary, if it were possible.
- Rethink the welcoming space of the church. Many survey respondents as well as the task force found the church foyer and front hall drab, uninviting, and not effective at communicating to church visitors where they should go for services, events, or assistance. Given the fact that our church architecture is uniquely shaped around our courtyard, the task force recommends considering how the entire path from the front entranceway to the courtyard could be seen as part of the welcoming space of the church. This would involve painting and reorganizing the foyer, replacing bulletin boards and signage with video monitors, and rethinking the Fellowship Room. Currently, this is a meeting room that blocks the courtyard view from the front entrance. We suggest updating this room so that the courtyard and front entryway are seen as continuous, rather than separated, and more of a meditation space or social space than a meeting space.

- Review the current space allocation in the church. While the task force does not have specific recommendations on how spaces should be used in the future, it is clear that they are not being used as efficiently as they could be and that a review could make significant improvements. A couple of initial observations: religious education materials should be moved from its current location in a closet off the Parish Hall and our church administrator needs another room for files that currently occupy her office.
- Remove trash. Very simply, there remains in our rooms and storage spaces many, many items that simply should be thrown away. While there has been a lot of work done while this task force was meeting and preparing this report regarding this problem in particular, we still have closets full of broken tables and other unusable items that should be removed in a coordinated church cleanout.

Considering Human and Financial Resources

Changes and New Expenditures

Hiring a Director of Properties. In considering how our space relates to our human and financial resources, it is clear that having our space maintained by a part-time employee without the authority to make decisions about the building has had a detrimental effect on it. We have had numerous expensive repairs made in the last several years because we do not have an employee specifically responsible for the building. Hiring a Director of Properties that would report to the minister to work 25 hours per week to oversee projects and activities, be a point of contact for scheduled activities, oversee the space and cleanliness of the building could be a significant improvement to our current building and grounds management.

Change in staff hours to better serve evening church attendees. By asking a staff member to work 6-8 p.m. Monday through Thursday, we could better allocate staff resources so that we have a staff member in the building to open the door (improving security) and greet evening church visitors and provide direction.

Considering Human and Financial Resources

Possibilities for Revenue

As indicated in the survey responses, there are many possible models for using our church space to generate revenue. The board of trustees should review how pressing the financial need is for such a revenue stream, as some possibilities for new uses of church space could bring in some funds but would be largely charitable (such as providing inexpensive space for nonprofit groups for meetings or to serve as their offices) while others would primarily be for raising revenue. An example of this might be partnering with a childcare provider or preschool that might make use of our lower level. This was suggested by five survey respondents, and in light of the construction

of the elementary school immediately adjacent to the church the task force discussed this possibility at length as well.