

Waban Packet: Question # 1

What brought you here?

Comprehensive Summary Statement

The Union Church of Waban emerges from these narratives as a spiritually grounded, mission-driven, radically welcoming community that serves as both sanctuary and catalyst in people's lives. Members arrive through many doors — proximity, invitation, marriage, children, crisis, grief, curiosity, or leadership — but they stay because they encounter warmth without pressure, faith without rigidity, justice without partisanship, and theology spacious enough to hold doubt, diversity, and difference.

The church is repeatedly experienced as a “big tent” Christian community: rooted in God and Jesus, yet open to multiple denominational backgrounds, interfaith families, skeptics, lifelong believers, and spiritual seekers. Its identity is shaped not by doctrinal gatekeeping but by lived hospitality, intergenerational connection, thoughtful preaching, and meaningful mission engagement. For families, it offers formative space for children to question and grow; for adults, it offers companionship in transition; for elders, it offers continuity, trust, and care.

Across decades and pastoral eras, what remains constant is the experience of being seen, welcomed, and invited into belonging — not as a finished believer, but as a person on a journey. In moments of personal upheaval or national uncertainty, the church becomes both refuge and launching point: a place to grieve, to hope, to serve, and to ask who they are becoming together.

In essence, the Union Church of Waban is experienced not simply as a place of worship, but as a living, evolving community where faith, justice, relationship, and openness meet — and where people find both home and horizon.

Quotable Quotes

We were actually married at the church. And I've just stayed.

I was a practicing Catholic and I just wanted to try something else. A lot of my friends already went to the Union Church. And so I used to visit there a lot on different occasions for different things. So I just thought I'd give it a shot.

I think it's more about what brings me back to the church. What first brought me to the church was we were dating. I was kind of interested in getting more involved in a church anyway. Prior to that, I'd been going to my grandparents' congregational church and it was just, it was a wonderful church. It was just not me. It was too big. It wasn't, I didn't feel kind of the connection with the people. When I started coming to this church, I'd always want to come back and I would meet someone new each week. I love the sermons and I started wanting to go to church, not just on the holidays, but I wanted to go to church on a regular basis and do things outside of the church, which I never, I haven't really had since I was really young. So that really has continued throughout.

It was in large part that the church that I grew up in was a very similar church. That was very important to me. And of course, living in Waban, it was very convenient. And so that was, that was what drew me here. When we were moving here, we knew we were having kids, and we wanted to have them church-ed. So those were those were my reasons for why.

Union Church was recommended to me by a mother of a friend. We had been church shopping for years, trying to find a place that would be satisfactory for the kids, for my partner, who had grown up Catholic, and for me, who had grown up Protestant. We were told that the Union Church was heavily mission-oriented, did a lot of things in the community, and were very active in social justice issues. So that was attractive. When we came and visited and found out it was like a federated or a union church with welcoming all kinds of backgrounds, and yet it remained God-centered and

Jesus-centered. It was just right in all of those ways, and it was nearby. I was pleased to find a church of many accepting many spiritual backgrounds and yet remained highly spiritual itself.

I was having a spiritual crisis after the election. And I joined UCW for the community and the social justice mission work. We looked at a number of different churches. I had always planned to join a religious community at some point to raise our children in a way that helped them reflect on the world outside their own bubble. But life with little kids is very hectic. And we didn't, it was sort of like, yeah, someday, someday, someday. And it wasn't until I realized that I needed more spiritual support that we really started looking at churches. And I think for us, the combination of the community at UCW and the theology sort of being a compromise between the theology that I grew up with and the theology that my husband grew up with felt like a good fit. But I think most of all, I was just shocked and elated when we came to the first service and for community connect, or not even community connections, but for when the parish greets, the community greets each other. I'd never seen people stand up and give each other hugs before in a religious community and that just blew me away. And I think it reflects the sense of support and community that UCW has.

What got me here was I was at a friend's birthday party of a member who was a member of the church at the time. My dad grew up Catholic, my mom grew up Lutheran. Before coming to Union Church, we would just alternate between those two denominations, churches for Christmas and Easter, and we would not go to church. because neither one really liked the other denomination. And so I was at my friend's birthday party and normally, like the sleepover birthday party is when I was a kid, like you'd get picked up at 10 or 11 in the morning the next day. But her mom was like, she needs to go to church. You all need to get picked up by like, 8 or 9 o'clock or something so that she can get to choir rehearsal and then be ready for church. And I was like, "Where do you go to church? And she said, "Union Church in Waban. And I was like, what time does it start? Because I was a middle schooler, I really cared about what time churches started. Because my parents would wake me up in the morning, like at 8 o'clock or 7 o'clock. And she was like, it starts at 10 a.m. And I was like, and it's the church right across the street from our elementary school. So it's really close. And she was like, yeah. And I was like, that sounds really good. So yeah, being the kid that I was, I, my mom picked me up, told, she asked again why we had to get picked up. I told her. And then she talked to my friend's mom. about the church. And then she was, and

then she drove me home and announced to my dad and my sister that we were going to try this church. Yeah. And that's how we got there.

I grew up in the Union Church decades ago, and my closest group of friends when I was in high school turned out to be kids who went to the youth fellowship at the Union Church. So the Union Church really formed my idea of what community is. And it was really the youth fellowship, not everything that came before that, right? This was my junior high and high school experience that formed my sense of faith in God and spirituality and my connection to the Union Church.

When we moved to the Boston area, we were really looking for a community of like-minded individuals. And we visited a number of churches in the Newton area. But both of us, when we visited the Union Church in Waban, and we walked out after fellowship hour. We both looked at each other and just said, this is the one. I think this will be reflecting in my answers to most of the questions, but it was really about the people. I mean, that first day that we visited the church, almost everybody came up and said, hello. Yeah. not only during the passing of the peace, but also down in the fellowship hour. They recognized we were new. They talked to us. And we learned quite quickly that it was a very mission-minded church, an unjudgmental church. We liked the message that was coming from the pulpit, that it just all seemed to resonate with us. So we haven't looked-- I mean, we didn't look further, and we've been with the Union Church for the last 10 years.

We moved back to Massachusetts and we attended a different church here in Newton at that time. And then we were eventually looking for a different church. And my husband was clicking around on the computer, and he really liked, when he found the Union Church in Waban on the website, he really liked the information and the feeling about the mission work of the church. So with the mission work, we were led to the building on one Sunday morning, and we were greeted at the door with a big smile, maybe not so much at the door, I don't quite remember, but maybe it was right inside the door when we were entering the sanctuary. We were given the biggest smile and the biggest hug, and it felt warm and genuine and very welcoming. And we also liked the welcoming feel and the thoughtful message and the meditative helpfulness coming from the pulpit. And we loved passing of the piece. And we also felt so grateful with all of the warm greetings and conversation and like sustained conversation down at reception, laughs, the

community right away. or a feeling of community right away. And our children were cared for right away as well, because that was the Sunday before Mardi Gras. And somebody had brought a king cake. And it was a beautiful king cake. And I think this person was famous for bringing king cakes. And not only did everybody seem to be loving the king cake, but down at the reception area, before my husband and I left the reception that morning, we were given a really huge piece of that king cake, like a ginormous section of the king cake. We weren't even known, but people were asking about us. And so it became known that we had three kids back at home. And so somebody gifted us the cake and said, please take this home for your kids to enjoy it. I think we stayed because of the mission and the community and the thoughtfulness from the pulpit.

I'm sort of Catholic raised and still loosely involved in the Catholic Church too. But I was not confident that the Catholic approach to confirmation and sort of faith formation, becoming into an adult or having an adult approach was going to work well for my kids. They were very they were very skeptical, to put it mildly. But I had been kicking the tires and, you know, a friend made a really cool point about when the kids do this sort of faith formation journey here at Union Church, they go as a cohort, they do their stuff, and then they go on this journey, and then some of them sort of go the whole enchilada, and then others are like, you know what, this journey was good, and I'm still mulling things over. And I loved that approach. I loved how inclusive it was. I loved the sort of bringing everyone in and recognizing that, you know, not everyone's going to sort of be on the same page. And I felt that would be a really good model for my two. So that's kind of what sort of got me sort of in the door. And I'd have to give Stacy a ton of credit for sort of like really firming up my presence here. She was a ridiculous, ridiculously strong voice from the pulpit and empathetic in quieter moments. a superb listener, just a really good, helmer of the congregation. And then, last but not least, I was finally convinced to hop into the choir, which has been super fun. So I'll pause it there. The three legs of the stool, so to speak.

I have been coming to the church all my life. My parents moved to Waban in the spring, and I was born in September. And so I was baptized in the church. I was confirmed, all that. Going to church was just a thing we did. And my parents joined the church because they saw it as a good fit because my father grew up in the Episcopal Church in Somerville and my mother grew up in Kansas going to a Baptist church. So I think they decided that they were going to be staying put for a while. They had been moving quite

a bit and they had four children and they thought that this would be something important to do. And so that's how we ended up coming to the church because they saw that it was a unique place that basically, it was a little bit more formal in those days, but one of the things about it that I have realized as an adult is that it is unique in that it reflects the people that are members of it at any given time. And I think that's an important aspect of it.

I started coming when I was very young. My parents brought me. I was so young, I hardly remember it.

I was raised in a Catholic and tried to stick with Catholicism for as long as I could. I didn't care for a lot of the stuff in it, especially the papal issues of it. I tried a bunch of other churches, Episcopal, because my brother was Episcopalian. I tried Universalist Unitarian, and I sort of gave up for a while. And then I started dating someone and she told me about this church and everything she told me about it was, I thought was probably too good to be true. So I went one day and the first thing I heard got me. And that was, the first speech she gives about who we are and who you are, who we are, you know, we're cross-generational, anybody looking on their spiritual journey where, mission-minded, everything that said just hit me. And I said, well, this is sort of what I've been looking for a very long time. And I'd say, because I am on a spiritual journey. This was the 1st place where I said, wow, I can explore things here. I can listen to people. And everybody's here. There's not limitations. There's people from different places, different sexual orientations, backgrounds, et cetera. And I said, this is just a perfect place for me to start coming, listening. And I felt very welcome at the very beginning as well. And to me, it was no longer sort of, you come here, you do this thing, but you come here, you'd be with us, you explore, and you try to figure out where you are in this community, because you're a part of this community and where you're going in your spiritual life.

I was brought up Episcopalian. I have loved the Episcopalian Church. I married a person who was a devout, I don't know, somewhere between an atheist and agnostic. And we had little kids, and we were aligned on wanting to find a spiritual place that was Christian-based, that was familiar enough to what we had both grown up with, but where we felt like we could find a common denominator. And UCW was that place. We looked around a bunch. And I think the two main reasons, were the message: you can

be wherever you are on your spiritual path. So if you're not sure what you believe, you're not sure what you want to believe, that literally was what brought us into the church. And as well as having a place where our kids could be themselves, be welcomed, could come in and out, you know, as they develop their own spiritual journey. And just a place that could be intergenerational and a community that we really don't find anywhere else in our lives, either, our school, the kids' school, our professional lives, our neighborhood. It just gives us that diversity and place of calm and acceptance and sort of unconditional openness that we really haven't found anywhere else. So we value it deeply.

I grew up Lutheran. My partner grew up moving from place to place. So they would find a church, whatever it may be. We did some church shopping. When we first moved to Newton, we actually had settled at a different church in Newton. And we're very happy there for a while and started, you know, bringing the kids up there. And then that church went through a whole bunch of changes, ministerial changes, and we just didn't feel at home there anymore. So we began looking again. At this point, we had the four kids and they were probably roughly somewhere between the ages of two and nine or something. And we very quickly settled on Union for many of the reasons that people have said, but I think the biggest thing for us was finding a place where the kids were comfortable and could explore and learn about faith. And Stacy was really what brought us in initially. And actually, I think at the time, Kathy was doing the children's programming too, which was amazing. But, you know, just finding a place where both of us were comfortable and the children were comfortable, is not necessarily easy to do. It makes six people happy. And we've just found that, there's something for everybody at our church. And all four of our kids went through the confirmation, but, several of them are somewhere between agnostic and atheist even now. And they're, just as welcome as the kids who wanted to get confirmed. And we're all in on, spirituality and religion. I also value the intergenerational piece because, we have never had any family living near us and my kids actually don't even have any grandparents left in their lives. So it's valuable to me that they make these intergenerational connections as well. And for myself, honestly, I just think that the breadth of the community is really valuable.

I go to Union Church of Waban because of my family members who do. That's the simple reason. We are at a stage of life. The backstory of that is that I'm a retired pastor and been around a lot of places. One of my churches complimented me on being a winsome curmudgeon who did not follow the rules. And I trust you to find another pastor

or rabbi or priest who gets complimented for not following the rules. And I like that. I've had an adventuresome life of faith. And now I'm old and declining. I'm depending more and more on family. I like Megan a lot. I like her breadth. I like the openness. You've all mentioned the openness, whether you're agnostic, atheist, somewhere on the journey. I find, after a lifetime of professional Christianity, I'm much more open, and I don't have beliefs anymore. I now have trust, and she acknowledges that.

I mean, we got married at UCW, I think some of the people drew us to it.

I came to Union because a colleague had told me this was a great community at the time, great pastors, still great pastors, and the community where I had been attending lost a great pastor, and then the interim was not an interim, the replacement pastor, the new pastor was really bad and drove everybody out. And yeah, when I started coming, I felt very inspired by both the pastors and the people I met and the things I heard that the community was doing, like Nicaragua Project and the things that they did around holidays for others and homeless and outreach. It was all of the values that I had with my previous church, and I felt like this could be my new church home.

What brought me here was simply to have a worship service that still had some religion. I'm not very orthodox. Over the years, Christianity has made a lot of sense to me, but I acknowledge other things too. But I wanted a service that had some religion in it.

I got a postcard. I was church shopping after moving to Newton, we had been at a church in the city, when we were in the city. The things that on the card struck me that was important: It was 10 A.m. versus 11 A.m. Kids went to Sunday school during the service. They didn't have to sit through it. And I had a four-year-old squirmy little boy, and I did not want to have to sit in church with him. And that it was, they talked about Nicaragua, which I had gone to in college, and that it was inclusive. And my biggest fear around church is walking to a church that's, we're right, you're wrong. This denomination is better than this denomination, which I have no tolerance for. So I came to this church for a number of reasons with my family. We had very young children at the time, a preschooler and an early elementary kid. And the church we were going to that we really loved in Boston had kind of lost all of its children. And it was more important as my kids got older that they were surrounded by other kids. And this church had lots of kids. So my kids came out here with my husband to check it out one Sunday, and it was

like a picnic, and basically they got wined and dined. Like, mom, they have hot dogs and hamburgers every day after church, and they have balloons and games, and it's the best of the cake. So we came in, there were lots of kids. So that was why we came.

The first time I came here, I was in graduate school at Boston College and living with a family. And as I drove their children, I took care of their children, as I drove them to play dates, I passed this church, quite a few times. It was charming. And then I noticed the name outside was the name of the pastor who had been my childhood minister. So it felt meant to be that I come here while I was in grad school. It's where my husband and I got married.

I think the first thing that brought us here was proximity. We just live about 1/2 a mile away. We were looking for a church that there wouldn't be a reason to not go on Sunday, because it was so close when we moved up here. The feeling of openness here resonated with me. And I met several different people that came, couples that came from different faith backgrounds, which was appealing given my partner's Greek Orthodox background. He said, the way he described it was this church had a big tent feel. And it just felt right. It just felt right.

Proximity and opportunity, and the right place, right time. We were not necessarily looking for a church, but we live in the neighborhood and happened to come by and thought, Hey, this is a really cute church. And then we looked up Megan and Amy and we thought hey how great two women, one queer woman who has a bunny as a pet, like these are the little things that got us through the door the first time and then coming in and finding that it was such a sort of like open community I have not historically been a churchgoer. I have one um Presbyterian parent and one Jewish parent. And so feeling like that was very much the norm in this community, I think was really welcoming. And then I think the other thing for us was, you know, after the election, wanting to really feeling a hunger to get involved with like local community, meet our neighbors, people of different, you know, generations and stages of life and also to have a sort of like avenue towards like maybe getting involved in like helping people. I think those were all sort of like the factors that conspired to bring us here.

I came in 1985. It was also partly proximity. We had moved to Waban recently, and we saw a brightly colored Christmas sign advertising carols, bells, and candlelight for a

Christmas Eve service, and decided that we would come for Christmas Eve. I was seven months pregnant, and we had a 2 plus year old little girl, and the church was absolutely packed. And it was Reverend Barnes and it was fun. And my daughter escaped somehow and ran up to the front of the church and instructed Paul Barnes to be quiet and then instructed the choir to sing. She was two and a half. Apparently that made an impression on Reverend Barnes because he pursued us as a family that for some reason or other he actually wanted in the church. I was raised Roman Catholic, as was my former husband, and we hadn't been to church in years, but we had talked about it and decided that when we had children, we would want to raise them in some tradition or other, and we came back. I enjoy the interdenominational aspect of the church, that there's not just one particular creed And I also find it a place of sanctuary. There's something about having at least an hour a week to sort of have space to think and pray and care for each other that our weeks get so hectic.

It so happened that one of our former church members, Stacy Swain, had become the pastor at this church. And Stacy reached out to see whether she was interested in taking a part-time CE director position. And it would be kind of weird if we didn't bring our own children to that program. So we decided to all go.

Okay, yes, to get to know more people and to know them well better.

Community and a place for my children and family to connect with other families in a deeper context than the day to day connection you get from church. I wasn't significantly motivated by faith or wanting to share faith. And in fact, one of the things that made me come back after our first trial was the that phrase that used to be always said, whether you're you're sure you know what to believe, or surely don't know what you believe, you're welcome here. That welcome was had a lot to do with me, feeling like this was the right place for me, personally and for our family.

First and foremost, was my family, my community, my friends. It's just what we did. Went to church on Sundays.

What brought me here was the warm welcome that my wife and I received at a candlelight vigil after 9/11 where the church and the community, both lit candles and walked around the neighborhood, just as a reflective memory of what had happened. And it was, it was like, it was like the day after, I think it happened. So it's very it was very fresh in everyone's mind. And there was a cohesive nature, kind of nationally, about what had happened, and there was an aggrieved society. And we found that to be quite moving. And although we didn't come back to the church right away, we had just sort of seen it as an event. So we thought that really nice thing to go to. We then started coming to the church, and after a while, took us a couple of years, but we, we joined the church. And so that's why, that's that's what brings me to church.

For me, first and foremost, was the welcoming nature, as I've told this story many times, but we we we moved here and found it difficult to kind of reestablish the friend group that we left behind. And I'm not a particularly religious person. My partner even less so, but we came to the church in desperation, and the first visit, we were recognized as new and welcomed. But it was just wonderful. And we were invited to reception. So that was the beginning, and then the words about wherever you are on your spiritual journey, you're welcome. That was important for both of us. And I would say thirdly, was the Nicaragua trip, because, again, not being particularly religious, and looking for community, but very interesting. In social justice, we found that appealing and that, I think there was a poster up, and so we started talking to people, and found out that even though we weren't members, we could join the trip. And so that kind of solidified everything for us.