

Community Church of Chapel Hill, Unitarian Universalist Listening Sessions Final Report to Rev. Thom Belote and Town Hall

Rev. Patty Hanneman

September 23, 2025

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this process, as you begin to consider how to move forward with the search for a new Music Director. The raw data from the listening sessions is provided in separate files. What follows in this report is a compilation of responses from the members and staff of your congregation as shared with me during seven scheduled listening sessions. In addition to this report being available to Rev. Thom, it will also serve as my presentation for the Town Hall meeting September 28th.

The purpose of the listening sessions and town hall meeting has been to allow members of the congregation to voice their concerns and listen to other members' concerns so that as leaders begin to create a vision for the future, the complexities involved are respected and appreciated. These are my reflections on and evaluation of the mechanics and culture of the system, and not a critique of the individuals within. Questions were designed to allow members to express their love for the current music program at Community Church of Chapel Hill, Unitarian Universalist (C3HUU), and their concerns and hopes for the future of the program. Altogether, 59 members and staff attended the sessions. After speaking with Rev. Thom about his wishes for the sessions, I settled on four comments/questions for members to respond to:

1. Share a time when the music at C3HUU had a positive impact on you and reflect on what conditions helped lead to that positive impact.
2. What has negatively impacted your experience of the music at C3HUU and what changes would you recommend to alleviate that?
3. What are your hopes for the music ministry at C3HUU?
4. How has our time here affirmed or challenged your perspectives?

This report is divided into three sections: context for the work, listening session results, and recommendations for consideration.

Context for the Work

First, the dynamics of organizations do not happen in a vacuum, and so it is always helpful to look at what is happening in the world beyond the walls of the organization. The relatively new Trump administration, and the war on progressivism in our national and regional politics have added to feelings of anxiety in many of our congregations. As people look to their local communities of care, they are becoming more sensitive to changes in those systems that disrupt familiarity. The resulting anxiety can lead to some strong reactions. I wanted to mention this because I've been seeing this tendency quite often the past several months. This has been a

very anxiety producing year and expectations for safe, familiar space have risen accordingly. Organizations serving historically marginalized groups are especially tender right now.

Secondly, the long tenure of the current Music Director will mean that for many members, the months ahead will feel much more like a transition than a change. For purposes of this work, it is helpful to make a distinction between *changes* – events that happen to us and impact our lives – and *transitions* – which happen within us. An example of this difference: recently I realized my knees no longer allowed me to be a morning jogger, which had been the source of daily endorphins for many years. While I miss that greatly, I now have the time to take long hikes through the woods each morning, allowing me to witness the world in a new and deeper way. The *change* from jogging to hiking was easy. The difficult part was the internal *transition* of seeing myself as an older person with arthritic knees.

Spiritually, transitions are much more difficult and time consuming than changes. Transitions require us to look at ourselves and our place in the world and our communities differently. There are a couple of important things to remember about transitions. First, they are a natural way for human beings to grow. We do not become wise in a linear fashion, but through a cycle of transitions, of seeing ourselves in a different and more appropriate light for our times. Second, every transition consists of three parts: an ending, a neutral zone, and a new beginning. To transition with grace and to provide safe space to those around us, each of these parts needs to be respected and tended to.

One of the important roles of organizational leaders is to keep things stirred up so that what we do reflects both the current and potential future of the community we serve. When we make needed changes, we also need to make space for those who are finding it difficult to transition to a new way of seeing themselves in relation to the rest of the community, and to appreciate their “endings.” While the search for a new Music Director can be a beautiful thing, even beautiful changes create endings – the end of being in a community of people with a leader you have history with and have come to appreciate and respect, and quite possibly the end of beloved music programming that no longer feels central to the church community. Normally transitions cause some disenchantment, and while this is difficult, it is a normal part of the process. Changes may happen rapidly; transitions take as long as they take. They can’t be rushed. Because this is the case, as you consider the changes you need to make to serve the organization you are becoming, I urge you to have *patience* with those who are feeling the need to make personal transitions so they may remain active, supportive members of the community. Feelings of sorrow are an important part of transitions, and there may be the need for some grief work as you move through the search. In the months and possibly years ahead, members will be at different phases of this transition process, and compassion for people on the spectrum between grief and enthusiasm will be important.

Listening Session Results -The comments I’ve listed in this report seemed to be the ones most often expressed. Please see the notes from each listening session for a more comprehensive list of responses.

Share a time when the music at C3HUU had a positive impact on you and reflect on what conditions helped lead to that positive impact.

What stood out most strongly for me as I listened to the responses to this first question was the importance of “meeting the moment” through music that gives voice to what is happening in the world. The most often cited case was the Matthew Shephard service, where the music gave voice to our Unitarian Universalist values in a powerful way. Other performances mentioned included the service for Ukraine, Children of Eden, Fiddler on the Roof (addressing immigration), Prayer to Mother Mary following the tsunami, and the Argentinian Latin Mass. In addition, the ability to follow these performances with whimsical musicals and pageants added to the richness of the music program.

Participants appreciated the wide variety of musical programming being offered, including Sunday services, galas, musicals, holiday pageants, and coffee house performances. This variety allows a wide range of ages and talent to participate in the life of the congregation, building stronger ties than would be possible with just choir participation. The wide variety also offers to people in the Triangle opportunities to experience the life of C3HUU.

Regarding Glenn’s leadership, participants appreciate his invitational, mentoring personality (although one participant added this had not been their experience). Overall, participants found that the Music Director’s ability to gauge people’s talent and find appropriate places for them within the music program – while also pushing them beyond the abilities they believed themselves to have – was a real strength and a primary reason for the success of the music program. The collaboration of Glenn and Rev. Thom to create services in which the music enriched the topic of the day was also appreciated.

What has negatively impacted your experience of the music at C3HUU and what changes would you recommend to alleviate that?

While many participants struggled to think of anything to say, there are a few points to highlight.

Several mentioned the constant tug between *performance* and *worship* that sometimes takes away from the worship experience. When the music is too difficult or the preparation time has been inadequate, it can make both musicians and listeners feel uncomfortable. Glenn tends toward new musical pieces rather than re-using tried-and-true music. This is true for both choral music and congregational hymns. Some would prefer a mix of new and familiar music. Finding just the right amount of difficulty can be challenging.

The current sound system is a distraction for some. Many find it difficult to use and volunteers to operate are therefore difficult to keep. Some mentioned that the system is really designed for speakers at the podium and not music. Given that music is such an important part of community life, it may need to be upgraded. It is difficult to hear what’s happening while

onstage, and difficult to hear congregational singing, particularly when listening to services on-line.

Some participants said the Music Committee needs to be more robust, with written responsibilities, to adequately support the Music Director and take on some of the burden of the music programming.

What are your hopes for the music ministry at C3HUU?

The hopes for the music program are varied. Participants expressed the desire to see much of the programming continue as it is now, including the galas, pageants, musicals, and high level of diversity of music for the worship services. At the same time, there was also wide recognition that this hope may be unreasonable. Overall, what seemed to be most important was to keep the *breadth* of the program intact: the ability to involve all ages, all levels of talent and experience, create opportunities for community building, and performances that both draw people from the community into the church and for the church to bring music out into the community.

Participants recognized the importance of having a Music Director that works collaboratively with Rev. Thom to provide music that “meets the moment” and enhances the message. A dedication to positive collegial relationships with staff as well as an invitational attitude toward members was often mentioned. The new Music Director should see him/herself as serving a ministry and not simply as a musician. This perspective shifts the relational dynamics of the role.

Enthusiasm, energy, a good sense of humor, a good heart and open mind, high quality music, and an open, embracing attitude are all hoped for qualities in the new Music Director. I was also heartened to hear participants talk about what they hoped to see from members of the congregation during this transition. A willingness to be invitational themselves, recognizing that a new Music Director will have passions and ideas that are different than Glenn’s, was mentioned. Participants expressed the hope that C3HUU would provide the grace, patience, and support required to help the new Music Director be successful.

Finally, participants hoped the congregation might consider updating the sound system, recognizing the importance of music to the congregation.

How has our time here affirmed or challenged your perspectives?

Participants expressed their appreciation for being part of this transition process through the listening sessions. There was enthusiasm balanced with the grief that is normal in losing a beloved Music Director. Some added that this process helped them think more deeply about challenges they were not aware of and of how important this transition is for many members of the congregation.

Recommendations for Consideration

1. Trust the process. Knowledgeable members have been chosen to serve on the search committee to work with Rev. Thom on this transition. Both Thom and the search committee work on behalf of the congregation and their duty of care is to mission, vision, and goals of the congregation. Trusting this process will provide the congregation with the most beneficial outcome.
2. Consider upgrading the sound system. If the budget allows, this transition may provide an opportunity to alleviate unnecessary frustration for a new Music Director.
3. Since Glenn's tenure was a very long one, consider an interim music position to allow some breathing space between Directors.
4. Consider having a core group of choir members develop a repertoire of music the choir is comfortable with, and which can serve multiple themes. This would help ease the transition, giving a new Director valuable information about the culture of the congregation and preferences of the choir.
5. Consider the feasibility of compensating Glenn for some of his intellectual property that might be re-used. The children's pageants were an example mentioned.
6. Be mindful that the current Music Director has had 22 years to grow into this role. His strong links to the music community and his passion for galas, musicals, and pageants have shaped the life of this community, as this community has shaped him. A new Director will have their own passions, which may take on a very different shape than what the congregation currently has. What seems most important about the depth and breadth of your current programming are the ways in which it invites such a wide variety of members to participate, and for the broader community to experience the church. There are many ways to do this, and the congregation will need to allow the new Director's passions to lead into new ways of accomplishing this.
7. Celebrate Glenn's time as Music Director! An important part of grieving losses is to show your deep appreciation and gratitude for what will now be in your past. I trust that plans are already underway for a big party. Respect Glenn's need to leave in a way that feels right for him.
8. Finally, as I reflect on our work together, I am reminded of my own experience as a ministerial intern at C3HUU. You all loved me into being a new minister, and I know that welcoming spirit is part of your DNA. I trust that whoever is fortunate enough to work with you as your new Music Director will be greeted with this same open and embracing spirit.

Final Notes:

During the Town Hall meeting, I will present the above report and then open the room for questions and comments. It would be helpful to have Rev. Thom available to answer any questions that pertain to next steps in the search process.

I anticipate the meeting to take about 90 minutes – the first half of it will be my presentation and the second half open discussion. I will end the session by thanking participants and offering a final blessing for the congregation.

Finally, please do not circulate this document to staff or members until after the Town Hall meeting, with the possible exception of search committee members. It will be important to meet face-to-face as a first step.