

JUDSON MEMORIAL CHURCH PROFILE - Autumn 2022

Description of the Congregation

Judson Memorial Church is a church in the Christian tradition with affiliations with the American Baptist Church, the United Church of Christ, and the Alliance of Baptists. Our congregation includes individuals identified with those faith traditions as well as individuals raised Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, and Buddhist, and individuals who consider themselves agnostic or atheist. Our understandings of God are diverse, and our spiritual journeys are taken seriously. In our mission statement, we describe our approach to faith “not as a monolithic or unchanging set of beliefs, but rather as a continual process of action, revelation, and exploration.” Judson Memorial Church is a place of spiritual curiosity where we encourage the asking of difficult and uncomfortable questions and the seeking of radically hopeful answers.

Since our inception in 1890, Judson’s mission has been to serve the neighborhood of Greenwich Village, the greater City of New York, and the wider world. The congregation aspires to be a multiracial, multicultural and cross-generational community. However, systematic and institutional racism remains an issue we must address as a predominantly white church. There are currently 247 active members and voting nonmembers in the Judson Congregation. Of the members, 85% identify as white and 15% identify as Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). Over half of the congregation's incomes fall within the middle class or higher, earning more than \$100,000 annually. Over 7% of Judsonites are considered low income. About one third of the congregation is over the age of 65 and between 50 and 65 percent are under the age of 50. Sixty-nine percent (69%) live in the metro New York City area.

Congregants, participants, and friends of Judson who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, straight, cisgender, transgender, questioning, intersex, and asexual, as well as those identified with additional sexual orientations and gender identities, describe Judson’s congregation as welcoming and affirming through its history, reputation, and actions. One member said “If you are queer, you aren’t ‘welcomed.’ You are home.” Another person felt relief to be in a church that wasn’t struggling with LGBTQIA+ inclusion. The strength of the community and the strong foundations of Judson’s history and values lead us to embrace all identities and life choices. The congregation values authenticity and myriad ways of being in the world.

Judson’s congregants include families with children, partnered adults, and single adults. Members of the congregation care deeply about one another, and this caring community has fostered long-term relationships and friendships. The congregation is an important part of many Judsonites' social and spiritual life. For some people, Judson is like an extended family. Our many creative, committed, and talented clergy, staff, members, and nonmembers are often described as a “deep bench” of resources in the Judson community. Congregants contribute time, money, and their passion for Judson’s mission. The Judson congregation embodies democracy in all its messiness and its potential.

Pandemic Transition

As in many congregations, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we engage with one another. In March of 2020, our clergy and staff overcame many obstacles, and began to offer services through Zoom and Youtube. This process displayed the strength of our community, as clergy and congregants learned new skills and devised creative solutions to the problem of worship in a time when we were unable to gather in traditional ways.

Everyone pitched in. Our Sunday School Director, Andy Frantz, created a half-hour weekly lesson that aired before the service for parents to watch with their children. Our Music Director, Henco Espag, recorded and posted the vocal parts for the service music, and choir members learned how to record themselves and how to harmonize virtually, creating socially-distanced works of art from their individual homes. One clergy, Rev Micah Bucey, started an online meditation group that met every morning. This group developed a model of collaborative leadership in which members of the congregation served as facilitators when the clergy could not be present. Rev. Dr. Valerie Holly assumed the executive leadership of the church.

As the pandemic went on, we focused energy and resources on continually improving the online experience. During our entirely online services, Judson was able to preserve strong virtual attendance, with only a modest drop in attendance from 65% in December 2019, pre-pandemic to 58% during the pandemic. Some of Judson's less represented demographics, 25-39 years olds specifically, actually increased their online attendance during the last two years.

Today, our new reality includes streaming services and a community that connects over Zoom as well as in person. Our reach has expanded, allowing many who cannot join us in person to remain part of Judson. Those members—often informally referred to as “the Judson diaspora”—who live far away from New York City, or who for other reasons are unable to take part in in-person services, are offered a sense of belonging. The Judson Youtube channel allows many individuals in the Judson community and beyond to connect to the service virtually throughout the week. Judson clergy have divided responsibility between Zoom and in-person leadership. Each Sunday, a clergy member watches the streaming service along with those participating on Zoom and leads a separate “celebration and concern” prayer and discussion with online participants, allowing those who join us virtually to feel connected to one another and to the clergy.

During the pandemic, clergy, staff, and members of the congregation have looked out for one another, paying particular attention to individuals who live alone, the elderly, and those without internet access or inclination. Additionally, the listserv provides a way for members to communicate and be in community virtually. Our tools for digital connection could be greatly improved, and we are working on getting up to speed with other ways to stay connected as a hybrid congregation. Our congregation comprises individuals with differing comfort levels with different technologies. Teaching and shepherding all participants through these new technological aspects is an area of opportunity.

COVID-19 continues to impact the congregation. We have been responsible for the safety of all who attend in-person services by continually updating protocols and keeping in-person attendees

informed of potential exposures. There have been significant losses within the church for which we did not have a chance to grieve together in person. While we cannot pretend COVID-19 is going away anytime soon, and while we acknowledge what it has taken from us, we have done deep work adapting to our new reality and figuring out the way forward.

Senior Minister Transition

In January 2021, our Senior Minister, Rev Dr. Donna Schaper, announced her retirement after serving as minister for 15 years. During her tenure, Donna introduced numerous new programs and ideas to Judson, such as the Community Minister Program, a clergy incubator that nurtured numerous new ministers who are now working in ministry across the country. Two ministers, Rev. Dr. Valerie Holly and Rev Micah Bucey (both former Community Ministers), have led Judson's congregation during the transition, devoting enormous time and energy to maintaining Judson's spiritual community and structure. Rev Dr. Holly and Rev. Bucey continue to offer invaluable leadership as we prepare for Judson's future. Their commitment to Judson's congregation and mission have been vital to sustaining our community's spiritual and emotional health.

A Transition Committee was formed to celebrate Rev Dr. Donna Schaper's ministry and to explore what the Judson community needs and wants for its future. This committee began a process of discernment regarding the priorities, hopes, and future aspirations of the congregation. The committee engaged with the congregation through a quantitative survey and guided group discussions to answer the question "who we are and where are we going?" In addition, Rev. Julie Johnson Staples, who is currently serving as our Transition Minister, has worked with the congregation to "hold up a mirror to the church," so we can examine what is working and not working. This process has helped us to acknowledge what needs to be done for us to grow into a stronger congregation. The committee created a Transition Report, and the Judson Board and Judson committees, including the Search Committee, are currently using those findings in their ongoing work.

How We Worship

Judson engages in communal worship through a variety of methods that have evolved dramatically over decades. Currently, in addition to our Sunday morning worship in the meeting room (our sanctuary), Judson offers various opportunities for worship in smaller and more intimate groups. These include a meditation group that meets on Zoom on Monday evenings and Friday and Saturday mornings, and the People's Judson services, which are led by members of our BIPOC community and meet periodically. The mode of worship through which the most congregants engage remains the Sunday morning 11:00 a.m. service.

As a church with denominational roots in both the Baptist and UCC traditions, Sunday worship services follow a familiar Protestant format, influenced and reshaped by the varied cultural and faith traditions our congregation encompasses. Judson's long sponsorship of and commitment to the arts enriches our worship each Sunday, with frequent dance, theatrical, and musical performances as part of the service. Finally, during the pandemic, Judson shifted its Sunday

services online, and we have continued in a hybrid format since reopening for in-person services. Each Sunday, a portion of the congregation attends via Zoom and Youtube.

At each Sunday worship, the core ministerial leadership team preaches a sermon as the “Interpreting for our time” section. These sermons follow a collaborative and rotating schedule, and clergy sometimes coordinate on thematic explorations that span multiple weeks. Guest preachers, such as, ordained members of the congregation as well as other congregants, preach throughout the year. The preacher will usually read the sermon from a manuscript and provide a written copy physically in the church. Videos of the sermons will also typically be available on Youtube. The assigned preacher for each week confers with the other ministers and usually takes responsibility for planning the rest of the service to cohesively and thematically match the messages explored in the testimony and sermon. In the recent transition survey administered to the Judson Community, the congregation identified innovative and multicultural forms of worship as a priority.

The service almost always includes one or two performances by artists—singers, dancers, instrumentalists—drawn not only from Judson's many talented soloists and small choir, but also from Judson Arts Wednesdays and many other artistic groups and communities connected to Judson. Congregational singing, with piano accompaniment, has long been at the heart of Judson's worship service, and attendees sing out enthusiastically. The service music (both performed and congregational) is notable for its variety - not restricted to the "religious" music of all eras, but selected from all genres (e.g., classical, showtunes, pop, world music, etc.) chosen to further express the theme of the week's service.

While the congregation has grown to expect a familiar format to the worship service, we recognize the call to continuously respond to the changing needs of the church and the community. Times change, people change, and we want to be sure we have the freedom to change along with them. As we welcome a more diverse congregation, we seek to respond with innovative and multicultural traditions that value both Baptist and UCC roots, and to affirm ways of worshiping that will feel relevant to everyone. Moving forward, we hope to preserve our commitment to the arts and social justice as primary pillars of our worship services, while at the same time pushing ourselves out of our familiar “box” of worship.

How We're Organized

Judson's primary governing body is the congregation, which is composed of members and voting non-members, and currently numbers 247 members and voting non-members. The congregation holds a yearly congregational meeting in which major issues such as finance, policy, budget, major staff, committee and board positions, and congregational or organizational priorities are discussed. Members of the Board of Trustees (the Board) and other governing and organizational committees are both voted on and representative of the congregation.

The board is composed of twelve people elected at the annual meeting in early December. Members are usually elected for a three-year term in “classes” of four, providing for regular turnover while ensuring continuity. Up to three non-members can serve on the Board in any year. Officers are elected at the annual meeting in December for a one-year term. These officer

positions include **Moderator, Vice Moderator, Clerk, Treasurer, and Assistant Treasurer**. The **Moderator** chairs the Board and undertakes other major responsibilities including appointing committee chairs and members (in consultation with the Ministers) and serving as an ex-officio member of all committees. The Board meets monthly and has general oversight of all of the church's affairs. Judson's **Standing Committees** include:

Nominating: Nominates officers and board members (new each year)

Finance: Prepares budget and pledge campaign, monitors fiscal performance

Personnel: Sets personnel policies, conducts an evaluation of ministers, and troubleshoots employee issues

Buildings: Cares for repair, maintenance, and long-term conservation of facilities

Membership and Voting: Maintains membership records

Special Committees include:

Congregational Life: Takes congregation's temperature and addresses congregational issues, plan special events, work to integrate newcomers

Ordination: Guides Judson's candidates for ABC or UCC ordination

Sunday School: Consults with Sunday School Director on curriculum and programs

Archives: Provides archival oversight of past records and current activities

Health and Safety: Establishes protocols to keep the church functioning and participants safe.

Committees meet on a regular basis and clergy and administrative staff attend meetings. One board member is usually on each Standing Committee and reports any new activity of that committee. Committees usually make recommendations of actions to the Board and the Board votes on the action.

The Board has fiduciary power and is responsible for the financial health of the church. The Finance Committee (advised by the Investment Subcommittee) and the Personnel Committee make budget recommendations each year which are voted on by the congregation at its annual meeting. In 2022, the endowment invested in socially responsible funds, and paid for extraordinary transition and building expenses. In the future we will need to set new priorities regarding staff and space rental, and/or raise outside money from our two fundraising groups, Friends of Judson (a 501(c)3 which focuses on Arts and Justice) and Open Access and Innovation (which will raise money for an elevator in the Meeting Room and other building related expenses).

Judson Memorial Church is a mid-sized organization with an annual budget of \$1.37M and an endowment valued at \$3.04M (both values are a three year rolling average).

Judson believes strongly in congregational autonomy and soul freedom, both of which are part of the history of Baptists and Congregationalists. These values are in our by-laws and practiced in the life of the church. We seek to uplift non-hierarchical, community-focused models of organization that prioritize equity and care within our congregation and in our interactions with the communities in which we exist and worship. Decisions are usually made through extensive

deliberation, discussion, discernment, and consensus processes within committees, in which we aim to make all voices and individual experiences heard and honored. The Senior Minister or other clergy often take the lead on specific issues or initiatives, but the Board and often the entire congregation approve most decisions before they are finalized.

Vision for Judson

Our Transition report (2022) expressed the following reflection on a vision for Judson's future:

“The expanded vision of a future Judson includes:

- A larger congregation, with significantly more BIPOC members and younger families
- Many congregants, actively involved in governance, committees, and social activities.
- A diverse and growing congregation that is involved in social justice programs
- Arts events and programming that immerse Judson in New York's art scene
- Outreach and partnerships with our denominations, faith institutions, and other organizations.
- Judson continuing its role as an important leadership voice in local and national arenas
- Successfully raising and securing sufficient funds to maintain the buildings, provide for an elevator, and hire more staff. “