

Annual Minister's Report (2000)

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

My ministry here in Albany is off to a good start thanks to the positive working relationship I have developed with the members and leadership of our congregation. Membership numbers are up. Giving is up. The congregation has decided to move forward on long delayed facilities improvements and possible expansion. I'm offering new classes and programs to satisfy congregational needs. Today, I'm pleased to report to you, the state of the congregation is good.

I've spent the first year of my ministry in Albany learning your methods and presenting myself so you can learn about me and my methods. The Startup Weekend at the end of October helped me better understand the history, desires and expectations I will encounter as your minister. I enter the church system with great respect for the wisdom and experience already here, suggesting changes only after I understand how things are already being done. I'm grateful to be serving such a well organized congregation.

Entering the Institutional System

Part of successfully entering an institutional system is developing personal relationships with as many people as possible as quickly as possible. This institutional acclimatization starts with the recognized leaders in the congregation serving on the Board and leading the committees, moves out to the people active in councils and committees, to the informal esteemed leaders who exercise power through their opinions and to the major supporters and boosters of the congregation. The success of any ministry depends on good, affirming relationships with every member of the congregation. I feel I've done a good job accomplishing this goal. A recent analysis of the membership showed a good affirming relationship with over half the members, name and face recognition with three quarters of the members, and name and face recognition with a goodly chunk of the children, particularly the older high school kids.

One of the great joys of my move to Albany has been working with such an excellent staff. I don't have to do the order of service anymore! Someone answers the phone for me! Having a staff has meant I've done more ministry and less clerical work than I was able to do in Port Charlotte. In the time since I've been working with them, I've developed a strong appreciation for Nancy, Dave, Ann and Meg's commitment, skill, and dedication to their work. I've worked hard to develop positive personal and professional relationships with each staff member.

Leadership in Religious Life

"Leadership in Religious Life," as it says in my contract, feels like an awesome responsibility of a congregation our size. There is a wide range of desires and expectations from the "hard shell atheist" to the "New Age spiritualist." Some want a lecture, others want to be entertained, yet others don't enjoy the service unless their emotions are touched, yet others aren't satisfied unless they come away with some new thoughts and ideas. I'm pleased to be getting lots of direct and indirect support for my preaching. I'm talking about what people

are concerned about and responding in useful and inspirational ways. I'm actively listening for the questions on people's minds and in their hearts and using this information to select my sermon topics, themes and approaches.

Because of the prompting of a couple members of the congregation, I organized a Spiritual Growth and Development Group meeting to see if people felt they had religious needs that went beyond Sunday morning. We had about 10 people come and share a few ideas. The group itself didn't gel so I've formed two new groups to address the needs expressed. The first is a "Spiritual Check-In" group whose purpose is to allow the members to share what is going on in their personal and spiritual growth and use the group as a resource to help them. The second group is interested in organizing another style of service using as inspiration the "Soulful Sundown" service being done in Boston at the First and Second Church. The final offering that I'd like to do three or four times a year is a 8:30-2:30pm Saturday Spiritual Renewal Retreat that will begin in the morning with silent meditation, break for lunch then do a circle of sharing burdens and sources of faith followed by a simple communion service. The one I did the day before Easter went very well with four of us in attendance.

Religious Education

I'm overjoyed to be working with such a fine and professionally run religious education program. Ann D'Attilio and we have developed a good working relationship as we've explored how I can work effectively with her and the RE council. My primary interface with the preschool and elementary children is on Sunday morning during "Kid's Time." This year I've used this time to tell the children stories, primarily from age appropriate storybooks. On the Sundays I'm not in the pulpit and in town, I've visited the children's classrooms to get a better understanding of what is happening there. The group I've had the most interaction with has been the Senior High kids. I included them as part of my installation and visited them several times on Sunday morning as well as a sleepover at the Way's house to have more informal dialogue.

My greatest involvement in religious education has been with the Adult program committee. I taught two classes this year. In the fall I taught my Buddhist Meditation class and in the winter I taught a class on the thought of Ken Wilber using his book titled *Sense and Soul* as the text. Both classes were heavily subscribed. The fall class had to be split into two sessions to accommodate everyone. The meditation class became a monthly meditation group that continues. The feedback from both classes was very positive. I particularly felt the Wilber class was excellent and stimulated some great discussion.

Working with Committees

An important challenge for me this year was learning how to do ministry in a larger congregation. FUUSA is the largest congregation I've been a member of. One of the first challenges I discovered (and was parodied in the Annual Dinner) was trying to do and oversee too much. I attended all the committee meetings I could and tried to get involved in all of them. The sheer size of the committee structure has prevented me from being more than an interested visitor and advisor to most committees, which seems like an appropriate role for me.

One of the reasons I decided to enter the ministry was seeing the spiritually uplifting dimension of small groups and committees during Pacific Central District Leadership School back in the summer of 1985. Having seen the transformative power of self-directive, collaborative, mutually appreciative groups, I take a strong interest in supporting the healthy functioning of the infrastructure of an institution. This is one of the reasons I've attended so many different committees.

My most intense involvement has been with the executive committee of the Board. I've been a regular attendee of the Board meeting (as per my contract) and the Program Coordinating Council. These two groups help me monitor what is going on in the congregation and I often take away tasks from each meeting. I've had less involvement with the Religious Education Council and the Social Responsibility Council because of conflicts of meeting schedules. I am working to increase my involvement particularly in the SRC because I see this as an important component of the congregation's identity and mission.

Of the many Fuusan committees, my primary focus this year has been religious services, membership, personnel and of course the Committee on Professional Ministry. I've worked to share the design of our order of service with the Religious Services Committee and cooperate in organizing speakers and programs.

Reaching Out to the Community

Important as working inside the congregation is to support its healthy functioning, we have a commitment in our congregation to make a positive difference in our community. I see community networking as an important part of my calling. You've told me you want to be better known in our community. As your ambassador of Unitarian Universalism to the Capital Region, I both represent us and gather information to bring back to you.

The most fruitful relationships I've developed have been with the West Hill Ministers Fellowship, a small group of local pastors seeking to address problems in our neighborhood through interfaith cooperation. We are working to improve the relationship of police officers with the local community. I'm just getting involved with church based community organizing initiative called ARISE. A number of people I respect are involved and ARISE has had significant success mobilizing 1000's of people to bring community leaders to the table to address community issues.

Pastoral Care

Pastoral care is a challenge in a congregation our size because there are often more needs than the ones I can take care of. I'm pleased with my partnership with Mary Ellen Deighan who leads our Caring Network. We've cooperated well this year to tend to those in our congregation in need.

Conclusion

Overall, I think we've had a great startup of my ministry here in Albany, planting seeds that will bear good fruit in the years ahead. We have a good match between my ministerial style and vision and the congregation's. I sense an excitement in the air. Good times are ahead

for us. Let us move into that future with courage as we carry the banner of liberal religion here in Albany.