

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany

Ministerial Review

Rev. Samuel A Trumbore May 9, 2001

I was speaking with a member of our congregation the other day and he was surprised that I'm just ending my second year serving the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany. "Seems like you've been here longer than that!" he said.

It may indeed feel like I've been here longer than that because of the activity level here. We are a very busy congregation with many meetings, classes, social events, services and celebrations. The desire expressed by this congregation last spring to investigate building expansion is partly a recognition that we want more space so we can do more to serve our members and our community.

Like the congregation, little moss grows on this rolling stone. This annual review is a chance to share with you some of what I've been doing in the past year, the progress I made this year on my goals, and my excitement enjoying the privilege of serving as your minister. I continue to find great delight in the compatibility of our relationship and the prospects for our future together.

I'd like to start by discussing my final goal: **Continue building trust with the congregation** (5 year project). Demonstrate ability to listen to criticism and respond constructively. I feel my relationships in the congregation continue to deepen as more trust is built. My working relationship with different committees and the board is professional and good. I'm putting less energy into committees now than I did last year but remain available to step in to help. Mary Ellen Deighan asked me to **help revitalize the caring network**. We had a meeting on Saturday morning that drew 20 people and out of that group a new committee was formed that has six team leaders. The committee is functioning well and I've never attended a meeting. The committee keeps up with me using email. This is the model of how I need to work with them. Intervene when my assistance is needed and let them do their jobs.

From the last to the first, my most important function that most people see of my ministry is my work on Sunday morning. I've been putting much more time into sermon preparation than I did last year and have gotten some positive results with several people commenting on feeling greater satisfaction with my preaching since last year. I've been able to offer some notable sermons this past year that have been well received. Grateful for the support and appreciation of my preaching, I'm finding a wider diversity of desires here for both style, content and approach than I experienced in Florida serving a smaller congregation. While the core themes ministers speak about are timeless and the methods of oratory ancient, the receptivity of each ear is diverse and the metaphor it can appreciate is unique. This challenge is a welcome one that has driven me to experiment with different topics and techniques. I'm stretching my abilities as I learn more about crafting words that reach a wider audience.

I've been reading books on public speaking, consulted a speech therapist, and joined Toastmasters to hone my presentation skills. My clear high priority goal is continuing

improvement in my preparation and speaking skills. With your support and encouragement, I believe we can grow together as we better understand each other.

Many of the visitors who are finding Unitarian Universalism attractive today do not have a religious upbringing or if they did, it wasn't dogmatic or oppressive. They come in our doors looking for a place to develop and practice their spiritual and moral lives that is both emotionally and intellectually satisfying. And they want more than just an inspiring sermon on Sunday morning. I have responded to these changing needs by adding a bit more traditional content to our services this year with a cornbread and cider communion at Thanksgiving, a Children's nativity playlet on Christmas Eve, and, with the energy and enthusiasm of Saul Rigberg and Robin Miller, a new Haggadah and Exodus playlet for our Passover Seder. The kind of emotionally satisfying ritual that works in Unitarian Universalism is the kind we create and modify ourselves. When we create and claim a tradition, it grows in meaning for us with each repetition.

In exploring spirituality, the performing arts and seeking justice, we've added a Soulful Sundown service on the first Sunday evening of every month. We started with a bang hosting Ernie Williams and his band followed by Chocolate Thunder, the African American youth drum core. With the help of some good press and good congregational turnout we'll finish the year with the poet Mark Nepo in May. My thanks to the leadership of Amy Lent, Sigrin Newell, Carol Lynn Youtz and Robb Smith for organizing and publicizing these events.

Other alternative worship experiences are now being offered to our members. I've arranged to have the Dances of Universal Peace meet one Saturday a month in our congregation. The times I've attended, several of our members have been participating along with the regulars from the American Sufi community.

Kid's Time continues to be a primary way for me to minister to our children. My theme this year was picking a character trait, such as responsibility, honesty and courage, as a focus for the month using stories and conversations to raise the importance of intentional character development. I've been a little disappointed in the low impact of this effort because there wasn't a programmed way for parents to follow up on my activity. I plan to work with the RE Council to discuss the future of Character Education with our kids and how to better integrate it with our RE programming.

Ann D'Attilio and I co-led the Rite-of-Passage program for seven high school students and mentors this year. All the students finished and they had a great time in Boston at the beginning of May. I'm sad I was unable to attend due to the death of Carrie Burchardt Pharr. While the program was a good one, I was concerned it lacked enough depth and plan to work with Ann to modify the program the next time we do it to try to engage the students more personally and emotionally.

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Sunday services are just one of the ways our friends and members can grow and practice their spiritual lives in our congregation. Another way is adult education classes. This year we tackled a difficult book called *The History of God* by Karen Armstrong for nine weeks in the Fall. It was a whirlwind tour of Jewish, Christian and Islamic thought for the last 4000 years. The practice I advocate for many Unitarian Universalists is meditation. I taught the basics of meditation in the Fall at a weekend retreat, offer a meditation group once a month on the first Thursday evenings, and two other retreat opportunities in the winter and spring on a Saturday. I also renamed my Spiritual Check-In group, Spiritual Mentoring. Spiritual Mentoring meets on the second Monday for mutual support as we practice our Unitarian Universalist principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.

Officiating at life passages is an important and often time-consuming part of my ministry. This past year I've done too many weddings and too many memorial services. Next year Lynn Ashley will be taking some of the wedding load off my shoulders. I'd really appreciate everyone's cooperation in not dying so we can limit or eliminate the need to do memorial services. Seriously, while they are often unpleasant to face, preparing memorial services is actually some of the more rewarding work of ministry. Memorial services give us all an opportunity to focus on what really matters. The living benefit greatly by having a moment to step back, look at the canvass of a person's life and put in perspective what makes life worth living.

The pastoral element of my ministry is probably the least visible to the congregation. People get sick, have accidents, go to the hospital and for the most part recover. New relationships form with enthusiasm and strained relationships sometimes break up. The Buddha saw it well: life has an unsatisfactory component that cannot be removed. And when people encounter suffering, they call their minister and ask for support. It is ongoing work that is never done because we are all at different places on our path through life with different struggles to face. My job is to join with each person, listening for the inner wisdom in each person, recognized or unrecognized, and offering what wisdom and compassion life has offered me.

My ministry reaches beyond our congregation into the community. I've continued to work this year with the West Hill Ministers helping to organize a "Meet the Chief" event bringing the police and the community together and several community breakfasts to talk about West Hill community issues. Overlapping with my involvement with the West Hill Ministerial Fellowship has been my increasing interest in ARISE, A Regional Initiative Supporting Empowerment that serves Troy, Saratoga, Schenectady and Albany areas. I spent a week in March getting trained in Buffalo in how to be a community organizer. Two weeks later I was elected President of ARISE. The experience has been like jumping on a speeding train as I hadn't been part of the inner core of leadership. While the work of coming up to speed has been tiring and stressful, I see great benefit for our congregation from active

involvement in ARISE. We see as central to our congregational mission, responding morally and ethically to a troubled world. The networks and coalitions I'm helping to build will open many doors for members of our congregation to make a positive and effective difference throughout the Capital Region. We must grow AND practice our religious lives in spirited celebration, individual development, and communal action.

Ministry is a tremendous investment of energy in people and relationships. Sometimes it is hard to know whether all the effort is making a positive difference in the lives of the people I serve. Once in awhile this investment yields visible returns. This fall I participated in the ordination of Justin Osterman, a former member of my Port Charlotte, Florida Fellowship. I offered him the Right Hand of Fellowship, a traditional ritual transmission of ministry from one minister to another that dates back to the time of Saul of Tarsus and probably beyond. While I can take little or no credit for his calling to ministry, seeing him maturing into a fine young minister filled with pride as if he was my own son. The ministerial spirit he saw in me helped him recognize that same spark in himself.

Passing on that inner flame is central to my ministry. Whether it is in a sermon, or a class or a counseling session or an exchange during coffee hour, there is a passion for being alive that lives in me I desire to share with everyone. The potentiality for humanity is so vast and so grand it sometimes keeps me up at night pondering the possible. As living sentient beings, we have the privilege of intentionally transforming the possible into the actual. Our Unitarian Universalist Society is a wonderful place to be part of that process and experience more life and more love.

Through all of our cooperation and collaboration, we can make it so.