

Minister's Annual Report (2006) Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore

“A Minister's Readiness Sabbatical”

As I write this shorter than usual report, I prepare to fly to Wisconsin to visit three thriving Unitarian Universalist congregations. I have also traveled to Golden Colorado, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Annapolis, Maryland, to do the same. As the houses next door came down and construction for our addition began, I've been busy preparing myself to grow into our new space.

Taking a six-month sabbatical from January through June felt a little strange when I proposed it last year to the Board. Finalizing the architectural plans and sending our expansion project out to bid didn't seem like the best moment for me to be leaving town. But as things are turning out, the timing was good. While I visited Thailand for three weeks, the congregation raised the final funds and had the final approval vote. Our congregation and its leadership have the maturity and confidence to make these important decisions without the minister holding it all together. My hat is off to you!

Even though our expansion project financial plan does not require us to expand our membership to pay the mortgage, our theme, “Build Up, Reach Out” assumes that having more space will allow us to reach out to and serve more people. We want to be able to have a larger voice for Unitarian Universalism in the Capital Region, the nation and the world. We want to see freedom, tolerance, justice, equity and compassion advance and spread at home and in the world. And if we effectively embody the “Beacon of Light” architectural theme in our congregational identity and action, people will be attracted to us and want to join us in our congregational life and work.

Part of that beacon will shine from the pulpit on Sunday morning. This has been a theme for me during my sabbatical. I've been looking back at how I choose sermon topics and how I've shaped and delivered them. I've been listening to podcasts of other minister's sermons and analyzing how they communicate effectively. I attended a UCC preaching seminar in Atlanta, Georgia with some of the best preachers of liberal religion. What I'm rediscovering is the more I know and can verbalize the depths of my humanity, its joys, suffering, struggles, and insights, the more effective I'll be with a wide audience. As my preaching moves into a larger space, I'm planning to expand my pulpit presence as well.

But power in the pulpit doesn't directly translate into more members. Some of our best preachers are in congregations that are stuck at a membership plateau. As I've visited different congregations, I've learned a great deal about what makes a congregation welcoming and inviting to newcomers. Key factors are attention, recognition, care and cultivating commitment. We need to develop our ministry of hospitality if we desire to become a fully welcoming congregation.

My sabbatical hasn't just been about studying congregational growth and developing my abilities as a public speaker. Through spending two weeks in meditation and visiting Thailand, I continue to explore Buddhism and ponder its connection with Unitarian

Universalism. As President of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship, I seek to find ways to interrelate the two faith traditions as we live them today. Combining the social commitment of Unitarian Universalism and the spiritual depth of Buddhism has great potential for Unitarian Universalist Buddhist practitioners. This will be the theme of the UUBF Convocation, April 12-15, 2007, in Garrison, New York. Mark your calendars now for a great weekend experience.

As my sabbatical is not over yet, I have another month to go, I'm not ready yet to say more about what I've learned and experienced.. I'm planning on generating a DVD of the photos I've taken from my travels along with commentary and summaries of my insights and learning.

The most important aspect of a sabbatical has been having extra time for rest, renewal and just trying new things. On a whim, I decided to plant some vegetable seeds and develop a small garden in our backyard. If the rabbits and deer can be deterred, I'll be growing a selection of herbs, sugar snap peas, broccoli, lettuce, and cherry tomatoes. The thrill of watching the seeds sprout and digging up the ground to plant them has me more deeply connected to the soil than I have been since I grew my own garden back when I was a teenager. I hope I'll be more successful this time, though I was quite good at growing squash and cucumbers.

I'm looking forward to my return this fall and resuming my ministry with you. With any luck I'll have some vegetables to share along with my insights!