

Minister's Annual Report (2014)

Rev. Sam Trumbore

Overview

Each year, reflecting back over the events documented each month in my minister's report to our Board of Trustees, I marvel at the many activities in which I've participated, the pastoral care crises and losses, the celebrations and services. Not only is it a joy for me to have this great calling to serve as a minister – what a joy to be doing that ministry here with this congregation, at such an exciting time in the history of civilization, and with such exciting opportunities before us. Serving the personal, spiritual and religious needs for growth and development in our congregation never gets stale boring or old for me. Even after 15 years, I still see many new and stimulating directions for this congregation to serve our needs and the needs of the world around us. There is meaning and satisfaction in abundance serving the purposes for which this congregation exists.

Sunday Services

Following the inspiration that arose from meeting in June with five other UU ministers to discuss how to follow up on the training we all received from the Rev. Scott Tayler at the January, 2013 Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association Convocation in Florida, we coordinated work together on **themes for the month**. The themes I chose for the month were: September – **Hospitality**, October – **Purpose**, November – **Courage**, December – **Connection**, January – **Compassion**, February – **Character**, March – **Journey**, April – **Freedom**. Each month, I used the theme as a focus for my newsletter column. I then did two or three services that connected in some way to that theme. Then the theme was used for deeper reflection and discussion as part of the Meaning Matters program. This focussed approach allowed me to go into greater depth than what might be possible considering a topic for only one Sunday. Response by members of the congregation has been good to this approach so I plan to continue it next year.

One experiment the Rev. Priscilla Richter, UU minister in Schenectady, the Rev. Lynn Ashley, UU minister in Glens Falls, and I did this year was to take the theme “journey” for the month of March and have each of us do a sermon on it, then offer it in the other two congregations, sort of a Capital Region Unitarian Universalists of New York (**CRUUNY**) **pulpit rotation**. It allowed each of us to have two weeks to work on other pressing projects rather than write a sermon. This was especially helpful the last week of the month when we were all in Erie, Pennsylvania for the St. Lawrence and Ohio Meadville combined District Annual Meeting.

Another experiment was to do a **pulpit exchange with the Rev. Douglas Taylor** and combine it with a workshop. January 10-12, I traveled to Binghamton and led one of my meditation workshops followed by doing the Sunday service. February 7-9, Rev. Taylor led a worship titled, **Building our Shared Theologies**. His Sunday service turned out to be very helpful to the Mission Task Force. This model of exchange worked very well and might be a model for similar exchanges in the future.

In addition to our regular services we do on Sunday morning, on occasion we have special services on other days. It was our turn to host the **Union Thanksgiving Service** that brings together members from Temple Beth Emeth, Trinity Methodist, Westminster Presbyterian and our congregation to celebrate our shared history of mutual support. Mayor elect **Kathy Sheehan** spoke to us this year and did a great job. Her presence also stimulated a great turnout compared to previous years. We also did a great **solstice service** this year that attracted a good turnout in Channing Hall. A new service that I helped lead was part of the January **Albany Peace Project** led by Bethany Gonyea. She was having

meditation services all month to stimulate interest in meditation as a path to reducing violence on the streets of Albany. I led a guided meditation at the service held in our congregation that she video-recorded and posted on her web site.

I continue to offer **meditation on Sunday morning** with a core group of about 12-18 people who come. I also offered several Friday night and Saturday retreats for people to learn more about the basics of mindfulness meditation practice. I have steady interest in mindfulness meditation and it continues to bring people to our congregation.

Lifespan Education

My small group educational initiative this year was **Meaning Matters**. Meaning Matters, a revised program drawing materials from the Rochester Unitarian Church program called Soul Matters, coordinates with the theme for the month bringing together the benefits of small group ministry techniques with a greater emphasis on content and learning. At the beginning of the month, the participants get a 8-12 page packet of materials related to the theme. The components are: 1) introductory essay, 2) deepening exercises, 3) exploration stimulating questions, 4) reading and viewing resources including quotes, books, articles, web links, movies and video clips. The text for the sermons (when available) is posted on my web site blog. At the end of the month, the small groups gather to check in, and discuss the deepening exercise and the questions. Rather than discuss the questions individually, each participant has the opportunity to discuss the question that grabs them and stimulates their reflection. Thus there is the content of the question to consider as well as why did that question engage them, adding a heart dimension to the conversation. The participants have been enthusiastic about both the content and the small group process. I plan to organize three groups next year and encourage greater participation, especially for those new to our congregation.

The second class I led for my Lenten Christian theme used Reza Aslan's controversial book **Zealot**. I started the class after offering a sermon using a theme from the book. About fifteen people participated in the class. I felt good that we didn't have people drop out of the class and they stayed till the end.

Finally, we hosted a class by the Capital Region Theological Center on evolution and religious groups led by **Dr. David Sloan Wilson**. I was pleased to have Leah Purcell and John Walko participating from our congregation, but would have desired a much larger participation. The content and discussion was very interesting and relevant to Unitarian Universalism, so I plan to use his class as the basis for a class for our congregation in the fall.

Mission Task Force

The Board decided to review our mission statement this year and their product will be up for approval at our annual meeting. I attended their meetings and did a **service March 9th** that supported their work. As part of the service, we encouraged people to fill out a questionnaire that was inserted in the order of service. This helped stimulate interest and get people thinking about it. A sermon I did in April also stimulated interest by using the proposed mission statement as the chalice lighting and touching on it in the sermon. This task force was a good example of the benefits possible when there is collaboration between minister and congregation for the good of the whole.

Personnel Transitions

Stephanie Hayes resigned in the fall creating the need to fill her position. The Board and Personnel Committee wisely decided to take some time to review that position before replacing her. **Patti Jo Newell** offered to serve as a temporary employee while we decided what we wanted the position to look like in the future. We decided to **merge the rental agent position with the office assistant**

position so we could **create a full time position**. We were able to then hire **Alyssa Yeager** who has done a magnificent job filling it. Thanks go to **Lynne Lekakis** who saw the value of merging the rental agent position into the full time position and thank her for her great service to our congregation in that role.

Fulfilling the Call

Fulfilling the Call: A Model for Unitarian Universalist Ministry in the 21st Century is the product of a year-long partnership between the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA), and Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC).

It was distributed to ministers and congregations as a tool to help ministers grow throughout their career in nine different areas identified as **critical areas of competence**. Those areas include:

1. Leads worship; 2. Officiates rites of passage; 3. Provides pastoral care and presence; 4. Encourages spiritual development; 5. Witnesses to social justice in the public square; 6. Leads administration; 7. Pursues personal renewal and professional development; 8. Serves the larger Unitarian Universalist faith; 9. Leads the faith into the future. I worked with the **Committee on Professional Ministry** to survey the congregation and determine at what level I was competent in each area. Thankfully there is general agreement that I'm competent in these nine areas, but of course there is room for growth. I've begun incorporating the feedback I've gotten into my planning for future personal growth and development. I thank the COPM for their sensitive and productive handling of this evaluative process.

Mini-Sabbatical

As I completed 14 years of service to this congregation last year, I decided it was time to take a little time for renewal. Originally I had thought that the best renewal I could have would be to take time for a month of meditation. Cleaning out the mind and resting the body is a wonderful renewal ... but I discovered other areas of interest that I thought would have great value for our congregation and Unitarian Universalism. Listening to a podcast by **Dr. Joanna Macy** about her experiences in 1979-80 spending a year in **Sri Lanka** moved me deeply to want to learn more about the organization she studied called **Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement**. Started by A. T. Ariyaratne in 1958, he used socially engaged Buddhist and Gandhian principles to work in poor villages on shared development projects that had socially transforming results for the villagers and the volunteers from the city. In the last 55 years the organization has worked in 15,000 villages. I wanted to see this amazing organization, the preeminent socially engaged Buddhism project in the world, for myself and find out what I could learn to bring back. I traveled there for three weeks in the middle of winter, getting to know the organization and beginning to unpack their organizational discoveries about how they do their work. Here are a few lessons I brought back from that trip:

1. The genius of “shramadana” is something we could bring into our congregational culture. Shared work parties around shared goals that include time for ceremonial beginning, great food, time for open dialogue and discussion during the work party and time at the end to celebrate our accomplishments would be of great benefit. We already know that shared work builds community. I just don't think we are intentional in building it into our organizational culture.
2. The Buddhist practices of loving kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (Mudita), and equanimity (upekka) are powerful, interfaith Sarvodaya community building tools we could develop as the foundation of a UU spirituality. We do not have regular practices to cultivate these qualities. What is so beautiful about them is they give access to the experience people refer to as spiritual with or without the theistic baggage that many in our congregation reject. Thankfully, others are working on this translation of these Buddhist

principles into the UU forms and I'll be investigating this more.

3. Sarvodaya's interfaith approach and focus on shared work for building community might be a tool for us to use here as we seek to bring congregations, churches and mosques together with our neighbors. I'd love to see the Central Avenue mosque, Mt. Pleasant Baptist and our congregation come together to work on a project that the local community sees as a priority.

The second leg of my sabbatical this year is **traveling to Europe** to spend time with my sister who lives in Germany to do a bit of a tour of the continent, visit our partner church in Romania, and preach in Basel, Switzerland to a small UU group there. Looking forward to this adventure starting May 1 and concluding with my return on June 11. So rather than take an extended period of time for sabbatical, I've taken trips that cover about two months of time. And I'm thinking the renewal will be comparable.

Concluding Thoughts

As I write this report the day before leaving for Europe, I'm partly not ready to go because there are very interesting developments just beginning that you'll be reading and talking about in the near future. I'm consulting with leaders at the Unitarian Universalist Association about the multi-site proposal I wrote about in the May Windows. If you haven't read it, I encourage you to return to it.

The vision of thinking of our congregation as an entity that doesn't just exist in one building but can exist in multiple sites is a radical change of how we think about ourselves with many implications. As I've started reflecting on this approach, I see many, many opportunities for our congregation to grow its ministry to reach many more people who would be interested in becoming Unitarian Universalists as well as support greater diversity of programs and services. Once you stop thinking about "church" as what happens on Sunday morning in just one building, many new possibilities come into play.

The biggest challenge is to open our imaginations about how to help people grow and develop in their lives and the lives of their children. Sunday morning is just one of many different approaches to support that process. Small groups are one process. Services in different locations and different times are another process. Electronic ministry as is being done by the Church of the Larger Fellowship (<http://clfuu.org>) is yet another one. What I'm realizing is how small my vision of supporting people's religious lives has been and the amazing possibilities that might be out there I haven't even considered.

As generations change, people change how they want to be involved in a religious organization. What will not change is the deep need people have for community, for meaning and for ongoing inner development. We have one contemporary way people will want to do that in the future and we need to offer it in innovative ways that will meet their needs and ours.

Rev. Sam