

Minister's Annual Report (2015)

Rev. Sam Trumbore

Overview

Once again, I'm pleased to report the state of our congregational health is very good. Under Peggy Sherman's capable leadership, our Board has been reviewing our strategic plan and organizing visionary changes to the institutional structures of our congregation. These changes promise to release more energy for service to our members and to the larger community around us. I'm grateful our Board is able to work in a visionary role and avoid struggling with internal problems between members and/or leaders. This is worthy of highlighting because we may not notice what isn't happening. I celebrate the harmony and collaborative atmosphere in our leadership as we strive to find better ways to serve each other, the community and the growth of Unitarian Universalism. May it continue and may we build upon the excellent work done in previous years.

Black Lives Matter

Beginning with the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, an important congregational focus could be summed up in the refrain, "Black Lives Matter." Greater (White) awareness of deaths of Black men and boys on a monthly basis has reminded (mostly White) members of our congregation of the work left to do to end racism and oppression in this nation. These deaths and the 50th anniversary of "Bloody Sunday" in Selma has motivated us to increase our efforts to dismantle the institutionalized dimensions of oppression. One place to find them is in our police departments.

My work was stimulated when Paul Murray and Don Hyman walked into my office with Mark Morrison-Reed's recently published book on Selma wondering if we might be able to invite him to come to speak in Albany. That conversation turned into weekly meetings from August through February planning a **50th Anniversary of Selma event on Saturday, February 28th at the Swyer Theater in The Egg**. It was followed May 1 with a **Capital Region UU's of New York joint service at Doane Stuart School's Golub Chapel**. The **Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed** spoke at both events. We raised over eight thousand dollars to put on the Saturday event partly through the UUA Funding Program and a M & T corporate donation but mostly through individual donations to the Honorary Committee. Putting on an event like the Saturday event was new for me. It fired my imagination for ways to raise the profile of our congregation in the community. Both events were well attended and very successful. And I'm very grateful no snowstorms shut us down.

In September, some of my ministerial colleagues were taking the "**ice bucket challenge**" as a way to bring attention to Ferguson. Leah and I talked about it and decided we could take the challenge too. So after our homecoming service in the fall, Leah and I each marched outside with an ice bucket in hand. We stood in front of the Peace Pole and dumped it over our heads with the video cameras rolling to document the event. Being doused with ice water wasn't pleasant. Still, it was far less unpleasant than I imagined the experience might be! The event was a splashy way to get our year started.

With the **lack of Grand Jury indictments** against police officers in the deaths of Brown and Gartner, I participated in **community meetings and demonstrations** along with members of our congregation. We are fortunate to have a police review board in Albany but other communities in the Capital Region need them as well, particularly Troy. I'm glad we have a Social Responsibilities Council Black Lives Matter task force to help us organize our efforts in this area to work in coalition and agitate for change.

Growth Through Service

Peggy Sherman shared her excitement with me after attending a workshop at General Assembly titled "Growth Through Service." I listened then watched a video of the workshop describing the program created by the UU Church of Delaware County (Pennsylvania). **The vision of "culture change"** to make service the center of congregational growth and development greatly appealed to me - and not just as a way to get more volunteers for our current activities. The workshop presented a vision of member growth, development, satisfaction and deepening commitment through doing service. That service could be inside the congregation such as our Caring Network does delivering food and offering rides to those in need. They could also be projects in the community and our neighborhood. What was different about this design was the attention to how the participant in the service opportunity would experience growth and development. And that forced the Delaware County congregation to look at how they structured their service opportunities to make sure that component was part of the experience of service.

I did a **presentation at the fall Board Retreat** on Growth Through Service using the video of the workshop from GA. Then Dick Dana did a magnificent job of presenting that video to about a hundred members of our congregation to stimulate their interest and enthusiasm for the program. We had a great weekend workshop with one of the architects of the program in Delaware County, Jody Malloy, and got many volunteers to help in the implementation.

I'm very excited about this program and its potential to stimulate the culture of service that is already well established in our congregation. We already know that member satisfaction levels track closely their level of activity and involvement. The more one does here, the more satisfied one is with the congregation, and the more one feels a sense of congregational ownership. Any program that stimulates growing commitment and satisfaction is one we should enthusiastically endorse. There is great promise here and I look forward to the development of this program.

UUMA Chapter Harmony

One of the side effects of the movement from UUA Districts to UUA Regions is the impact on UU Minister Association's chapters. Historically, these chapters have met in alignment with UUA Districts. The **St. Lawrence UUMA Chapter** meets once in the fall and once in the spring in proximity to the annual District Assembly. When the Ohio Meadville District and the St. Lawrence district started having a joint District Assembly, this created tensions. The **Ohio Meadville UUMA Chapter** hadn't been in the habit of having a full spring meeting the way the St. Lawrence chapter did, so we invited them to "our" meeting. This was fine the first time, but the second time, they didn't feel included in the design which caused tensions.

To resolve those tensions, olive branch in hand, I **attended the OMD UUMA Chapter fall retreat** to invite their involvement in the design of this year's spring retreat. A representative from their chapter, Mary Grigolia, and I took responsibility for jointing planning the meeting. This meeting also includes both Liberal Religious Education Directors Association (LREDA) chapters as well, so we decided to invite their collaboration too for the first time. I'm happy to report a high level of satisfaction was attained with this retreat and very good participation from all chapters.

A Vision of Humanistic Buddhism

Another big March event this year was the biannual **UU Buddhist Fellowship Convocation**. This year it was held in Garrison, New York at the **Garrison Institute**. Our featured speaker was **Stephen**

Batchelor, a respected Buddhist Scholar whose book, *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, was important not just for Western Buddhists but also many Unitarian Universalist humanists. Attendance for this event was excellent, over 120 people, the best ever since our first Convocation in 2005. I video-recorded and audio-recorded Batchelor's talks which can be found on the UUBF website <http://uubf.org/> Again, satisfaction with this retreat was very high, providing a platform for future development of the relationship between Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism. Mindfulness oriented Buddhist meditation provides a non-theistic growth and development tool that can be right at home in an Unitarian Universalist context. Given how popular mindfulness meditation methods are right now, it is a great way to bring people into our congregations. (This is one of my personal legacy projects that I hope will be looked back on with appreciation fifty or a hundred years after I'm gone.)

Sunday Services

I've continued this year with **Sunday Service themes** without being slavish to them. My column usually includes the theme which I then integrate into the theme packet used by the Meaning Matters groups. The themes this year were: September: **Promise**; October: **Renewal**; November: **Grace**; December: **Wonder**; January: **Integrity**; February: **Faith**; March **Resilience**; April: **Interdependence**; May: **Tradition**.

Matt, Leah and I continue to collaborate each Wednesday planning the Sunday service. Our integration of music and message from Leah continues to get stronger as do our multi-generational services.

Here are a few memorable services this year:

- **"Overcoming Betrayal of Faith,"** September 14
- **"A Sensual Faith"** October 5 – I showed slides of paintings I photographed in Europe as part of my mini-sabbatical last May.
- In November's services, I explored grace from different angles: **"Hindered by Doubt;"** **"Rescued by Love;"** **"Poisoned by Craving;"** and **"Redeemed by Gratitude."**
- **"Fulfillment Through Passing the Bucket,"** January 25 – included one of the architects of Growth through Service who was visiting for a workshop January 24. Explored the theme of growing through service.
- **"Faitheist?"** February 1 and **"Pentacostal UUs?"** March 8 – investigated two different UU theological trends, the new atheists movement from the angle of those who are not resistant to traditional religious concepts but are atheists and the merger of a Black Pentecostal church with the Tulsa UU congregation and asked if there are lessons for us.
- **"Making a Commitment to Climate Justice,"** April 26 – social justice themed service. This service was part of a three way pulpit swap with Saratoga Springs and Glens Falls
- **"Fighting For Lost Causes,"** January 11 – another social justice themed service that used video clips from the movie, "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" as part of the presentation.

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

This was my second year of the small group educational initiative called **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) are 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. Support and enthusiasm for the program continues. Whereas last year only one group did well, this year both groups thrived. It looks like the program is beginning to take root. I hope I might be able to add a third session next year.

Leah Purcell, Tom Mercer and I collaborated on presenting a six week UU history class based on six DVD's titled *Long Strange Trip* we watched then discussed. There were about ten of us who participated. I was happy to offer some UU history in a format that people found attractive and held their interest to the last DVD.

Pastoral Care Associates

The Pastoral Care Associates program continues to be a critically important aid to the pastoral care ministry in our congregation. Many more people are getting support than I could offer alone. Plus having eight people paying attention to members of the congregation is also very helpful. I find out about pastoral care needs I might not know about otherwise. This year we had two PCA's step down, Jerry Deighan and John Newell, and two new ones get installed, Chuck Manning and Dave Munro.

Concluding Thoughts

While many UU congregations in the Northeast are seeing declines in membership, we are maintaining our base though we too are seeing the numbers slip a little bit. The glow of building Emerson has worn off and the excitement and enthusiasm generated by our expansion process has settled down.

This is a problem because we haven't integrated our full mortgage payment into our budget and we are not currently able to pay our employees at the appropriate UUA salary guidelines. We have significant financial needs that demand growth.

Membership growth hasn't been the center of the work I've done in our congregation. Going forward, I'm realizing I need to invest more energy in the day to day work of cultivating new members. Thankfully, I've been reducing my commitments and responsibilities outside FUUSA to focus more intently on member recruitment and retention. I hope I'll be reporting to you success in that process next year about this time.

Rev. Sam