

Minister's Annual Report (2016)

Rev. Sam Trumbore

Overview

This has been a fairly quiet year at Albany UU. The Presidential Race seems to be overshadowing everything else. My sense is this has been a year of congregational development as we get ready to start the Growth Through Service program and get our new web site up and running. We definitely have seen a drop in visitors and attendance numbers that are troubling. My hope is our development work will pay off next year in more visitors and greater involvement. Otherwise, we are a very active congregation with a busy calendar. Here are some of the activities in which I've been involved.

Black Lives Still Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement saw a growing resistance this fall with the defacing of the ramp in front of our building with the words, "All lifes (sic) matter." We saw a billboard campaign that trumpeted "Blue Lives Matter." Hatred of those not identified as white runs deep in the US population.

At the suggestion of Jacqui Williams, I contacted the **Rev. Julie Taylor**, a UU community minister who also serves as chaplain for the Air Force Reserve in Scotia once a month. With the support of our Black Lives Matter task force, I arranged with Rev. Taylor for a visit with her in December to meet and plan a presentation on Saturday, January 9 with Capital Area Against Mass Incarceration (CAAMI). It was a great event that brought a large diverse crowd to Emerson Community Hall.

I gave a sermon in October titled, "Freedom and Fulfillment Through Letting Go," to discuss letting go of white privilege. I did a lot of research for this sermon that woke me up to aspects of white privilege I wasn't aware of. At last year's General Assembly, Chris Crass, a white, long time anti-racist activist, spoke about the power of white people to work to dismantle systemic racism enforced by policy, laws and police. This inspired me to start a "**White Privilege Study Group**" to learn more about white privilege to radicalize white people to start doing something about it. The premise is white people need to know not just the damage racism is doing to non-whites, **but also how they are being harmed** by a system that oppresses non-whites. **White people need to find the inner drive to fight racism** for themselves as well as for others. The group has watched a couple of videos on white privilege, read together Ta-Nehisi Coates book, *Between the World and Me*, and is reading *Waking Up White*, by Debbie Irving. Participation has been very good with 15-18 people at our meetings.

Growth Through Service

I continue to be inspired about the potential for Growth Through Service to energize our congregation's volunteer pool and enhance the meaning and satisfaction people get from participation. To kick start the process of creating an introductory video to the program, **I took my video camera out and videotaped almost 50 members of our congregation**, collecting over 18 hours of video. It was a wonderful exercise to interview members of our congregation about their satisfaction from participation in the work and activities of our congregation. Now we have a goldmine of video for other purposes than our initial video. I hope we are able to use this video and collect more to make additional videos on the more specific themes of volunteering as an RE teacher, involvement in direct service and social advocacy work.

I also **worked on developing a database** for the information collected in the program. We need to track the service opportunities, information on each member including their volunteer history and interests, and the proposed and accepted matches between members and service opportunities. Initially we thought we could do this by creating an Access Database. Charles Fischer, Chris Jensen, Jim Hutchins and I met to design such a system. After examining a design I suggested and modified with

their input, Jim encouraged me to contact the UU Church of Delaware County to see if we could get their software and use it. After much negotiation, they said yes, but it took another four months to get the software from them. So now Todd Weissman has the software and we're seeing what we can come up with. Meanwhile, I've created a simple data collection form to collect input from those starting to do interviews so we can begin to store and use the information they collect from their conversations.

Religious Services

The positive response I've gotten from the different sermons I've given this year suggest a good level of satisfaction. The Sunday Services Log the Religious Services Committee maintains is mostly positive too.

I had a Humanist focus for the month of October to test the idea that younger people and the "nones" were attracted to non-theistic topics. I swung the other way around Easter in March with more Christian themed services. This year we had a dance around the may pole to celebrate Beltane, an earth centered holiday. In December we also had a lovely Solstice celebration that had six of us planning it. And we had our first UU Passover Seder in seven years with 33 people participating.

I continue to use the Soul/Meaning Matters themes being used by other UU congregations as our themes for the month. Here is a sampling of the Sunday services this year:

Sunday Morning Service Highlights

- **"Twenty-First Century Humanism,"** October 4
"Humanistic Buddhism," October 25
Two sermons on Humanism to stimulate interest and discussion for two classes that followed them that used the same names as titles for the classes
- **"Freedom and Fulfillment Through Letting Go,"** October 11
An examination of "white privilege" and the need to abandon it for everyone's benefit.
- **"The Pluralistic Spirit of the Sacred Harp,"** November 8
We enjoyed guest Shape Note singers from Bennington who performed this music for us. The songs were mixed in with background on this musical tradition and religious connections to it.
- **"Not Making It Worse,"** December 13
Wrestling with problems in the Middle East and how we might be helpful or not helpful.
- **The Complaint Free Challenge,"** January 3
Introduction of wearing purple bracelets as a way to remind ourselves to change our complaining and criticizing habits.
- **"Respecting Black Bodies,"** January 24
A look at the ideas in the book, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates and how those who are identified as white can work to resist that systemic evil
- **"Defiant Heretics,"** January 31
A look at our heretical tradition, its value and its problems.
- **"Cultivating Healthy Desire"** - February 21
- **"The Fulfillment of Desire"** - February 28
Exploration of Amanda Palmer's ideas of generosity and asking.
- **"Liberation through Cultural and Theological Competence,"** March 6
Examining the parallels between different methods of interfaith dialogue and theories of how to develop greater cultural competence and cross cultural communication.

- **“Liberation through Witnessing Impermanence,”** March 13
Using the experience of my meditation retreat experience in February and exploring how impermanence could be helpful in the process of liberation.
- **“Liberation through Sacrifice,”** March 20
A challenging sermon looking at Jesus’ decision to go to Jerusalem and his mission to realize the Realm of God on Earth.
- **“Liberation through Easter,”** March 27
Multigenerational Service that worked with two parables and post death Jesus.
- **“Climate Change ... and You ... and Us,”** April 24
Approaching Climate change in a moral way rather than as a policy question.

If any of these sermons have stimulated your interest, you can read them or read them again at our web site at this address: <http://albanyuu.org> and look for the sermons under the services tab.

Lifespan

Meaning Matters continues to be a way I connect on a monthly basis with those who want to go deeper into their spiritual lives by contemplating the monthly theme. I distribute a packet I receive and edit from the Soul Matters network just before the beginning of the month. This twelve page packet has a couple of short essays on the theme, deepening exercises, questions for reflection, quotes, electronic media and podcast links, books, movies, music, all to assist the participant to go deeper into the theme. This year I ran three groups that had about thirty people signed up and about twenty regular participants.

The short classes I ran were:

- **Twenty-First Century Humanism** – Using the idea that a new generation of non-believers are finding new and different approaches to Humanism, we worked with Phil Zuckerman’s book, *Living the Secular Life*, as a springboard for discussion.
- **Humanistic Buddhism** – I worked with books by Stephen Batchelor, Sam Harris, David Loy, Mark Gura and others, to explore the Humanistic approach to Buddhism that is emerging in the West.
- **Cultural and Theological Competence** – Used Paul F Knitter’s book, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* analysis of how religions get along with each other (or don’t) and contemporary Cultural Communication and Competence theory to explore their connections.
- **Climate Change ... and You ... and Us** – Follow up on Climate Change sermon to look at ways our congregation can be a moral voice against fossil fuel consumption and present a positive vision for ending extractivism.

Pastoral Care

This has been a challenging year as we’ve lost **Sue Berzinis** who died of cancer at the end of March. Our congregation did a great job of offering Sue and Al support during that time. A key component of that support was our Pastoral Care Associate program.

The PCA’s continue to provide valued and critical support to our members. This year, **Bruce Rodgers** stepped down and we welcomed **Lisa Barron** to our team. We continue to have a strong group offering listening and personal connection that makes a difference.

Staff Report

With the **departure of Alyssa Yeager** in June, and the fundraising shortfall last year, we decided to reassess our staffing configuration. We reshuffled administrative responsibilities and advertised for a 20 hour administrative assistant. We had the good fortune to find **Tammy Hathaway** who had served as a UU congregational administrator in North Dakota. It was a wonderful pairing as she wanted a half time position and she had just the right set of skills we were looking for. We've been delighted to have her working for us ever since.

We are **still down twenty hours of staff time** however. Thankfully volunteers like **Reese Satin** who has come in every Monday to count money and make a deposit and **Michaela Pochily** who is our incoming Asst. Treasurer doing data entry, and our long suffering **Treasurer Kathy Harris** work, we are managing. What is missing is the support for the Membership Committee and some of the creative work Alyssa was doing for social media. Those are still critically important and we are seeking volunteers to fill those roles.

The staff continues to experience dissatisfaction around our congregation's compliance with the **Fair Compensation Guidelines** as published by the UUA. We are making progress, but more is needed.

Partner Church Work

Dave Metz and I have been collaborating on a **Partner Church trip to Szökefalva**, Romania for this coming August. **We had to cancel** it due a shortage of people willing to go visit. Right now we are working on **bringing our partner church's minister and two members to visit in the beginning of October** this fall. That should stimulate excitement about a visit next summer.

Internships

Deborah Bennett, a current seminarian at Starr King School for the Ministry lives nearby in New Lebanon. She approached me about the possibility of being my intern next year. As things turned out she took another internship position in Winchester, Massachusetts before we could look at this as a possibility. I have had a long standing desire to bring another intern to our congregation and I hope we can consider this in the next budget year (2017-2018).

Personal Renewal

Philomena and I celebrated our 25th wedding anniversary in March of 2015. We finally found the time to celebrate with a **trip to Panama** in the beginning of January. We had a splendid time and will be sharing it with our membership with a dinner and slide show in June as a service auction item. I also took some time to do a **meditation retreat** at the Forest Refuge of the Insight Meditation Center that I found very renewing of my spirit and energy.

Concluding Thoughts

There is a lot of **angst in the Unitarian Universalist Association** as we prepare to welcome the next generation of Unitarian Universalists into our midst. Millenials are just beginning to start showing up in the traditional way with their children or babies in their arms. We don't know what adjustments we'll need to make to fulfill their religious needs, but we do know that **this happens with every generational change**. I've been a UU long enough to have seen some of those changes. My experience is **we continue to get better** with those changes. So **let us not fear change, but embrace it** and let it stretch us in ways that will open our minds and hearts.

Rev. Sam