

Minister's Annual Report (2020)

Rev. Sam Trumbore

Overview

This has been a year like no other in my ministry. The Coronavirus/covid-19 pandemic brought our use of our building to a halt March 13. Our last service in Community Hall happened March 8th. Building use stopped but much of our organizational life shifted on line with our first Zoom service on March 15th. We've been online ever since continuing to improve our ability to do everything we say in the chalice lighting each Sunday as we welcome free seekers, excite the human spirit, inspire its growth and development, respond morally and ethically to a troubled world and sustain a vital and nurturing religious community.

We don't know how long we will be sheltering in our homes. For many of us it will be until the virus is gone or a vaccine is developed and widely available. I expect we will continue to do a lot of things using online meetings to save fossil fuels and enjoy the convenience of meeting together in our homes. But a day will come, hopefully sooner rather than later when we will be back in Community Hall on Sunday morning.

Music Director Resignation

I returned back to work at the end of July last summer when I heard from our last Music Director, Rick Porterfield, that he had accepted a job in New York City as the music director for his former church. This created a crisis as plans for the fall had to be made immediately. There was no time for a search process for a replacement. Randy Rosette, Chris Jensen and Ann Brandon agreed to reprise their fall fill-in work as they did when Matt Edwards left. During the fall, a subcommittee of the Board reflected on the state of our music program and made recommendations to the board that we expand the music director position from 16 to 20 hours with recommendations for programmatic changes. The Board accepted the recommendations but decided not to act on them until after we had a sense of whether people would give more money to invest in our music program. Then the virus hit in the middle of March. Searching for a new music director when income was so uncertain seemed unwise. Thankfully Randy and Chris continued to provide music and support for Zoom on Sunday morning with the addition of the accompanist Elena Karpoff to replace Ann Brandon. All this will be revisited in the fall when we have more clarity about the virus and whether we can open in September or January.

COVID-19, Building Shutdown, Quarantine

The appearance COVID-19, had a dramatic impact on our congregational life. With the decision by Governor Cuomo to shut down the state and public gatherings, we ended doing our services in our building and started doing them online using Zoom March 15th. We quickly closed the building for all uses, stopping even the AA groups from meeting. Our staff has been working from home. Thankfully, we are all healthy and no one has gotten the virus from attending an event in our congregation. As of this writing we all our meetings continue to be online using Zoom and we expect to continue to do that for the foreseeable future. Without a vaccine in sight or an effective treatment, it would be irresponsible for us to begin using our building again. The only exception at this point would be to use our building for recording music but even that is questionable.

Dan Miyake's Internship

It has been a joy to have Dan Miyake as our intern this year. His services on Sunday morning have been greatly appreciated by the congregation. He is working with the Inclusivity team on its commitment to renew our Welcoming Congregation status. As part of the renewal process, Dan and I led a class called "Transforming Hearts: Transgender Inclusion in Congregations." Dan has also led a Wellspring group successfully. Dan saw the Ministerial Fellowship Committee in March and was granted Preliminary Fellowship. He has also been able to secure employment beginning in August as a minister. I am grateful to have worked with him and helped him get launched in Unitarian Universalist ministry.

Religious Services

Leah Purcell and I continue to use the Meaning Matters/Soul Matters Theme of the Month approach to coordinate with Sunday services and the religious education program. This continues to be an effective way to bring a multigenerational approach to connect the Sunday service to RE. Working within a theme, I strive to

address the range of people's interests such as theology, pastoral and social issues, UUism, spirituality and inspiration.

With the building shutdown and home quarantine, we were forced to move our service online. Fortunately, I have been doing television and video production since high school, so our services have worked out very well. There are challenges doing services in this format, but most folks appreciate the continuity of parts of the service like Community Greeting and Joys and Sorrows. Overall, we are holding together well.

Here is a sampling of the Sunday services this year:

Sunday Service Highlights

- **“Stop Human Extinction,”** September 15
- **“Across Impossible Divides,”** September 22
- **“Rosh Hashanah and the Stinky Kishke,”** September 29 (Dan Miyake)
- **“Having The Conversation,”** November 3 (with Dave Munro)
- **“Cost of Homelessness,”** November 10
- **“Transgender Day of Remembrance,”** November 17 (Dan Miyake)
- **“Thanksgiving and the Platinum Rule,”** November 24 (with Dan Miyake)
- **“Graceful Delight,”** December 8
- **“Blue Christmas,”** December 15 (with Dan Miyake)
- **“Reflecting Backward, Planning Forward,”** January 5
- **“Beloved Community,”** January 12
- **“An Emerging Vision Through the Lens of Governance and Ministry,”** March 1 (with Patti Jo Newell)
- **“Valuing Truth More Than Power,”** March 8
- **“Scriptural Wisdom,”** March 29

If you missed one of these sermons or would like to read it, you'll find most of them archived here:

<http://members.albanyuu.org/wp/services/sermons/>

Community Hall Sound System: Continuing Improvements

Unfortunately, the sound improvements made last year have created more dissatisfaction than the old system did. And people were not happy with the old one either. Through a vendor reference, I was able to find a professional sound engineer who worked with the Community Speakers sound engineers to evaluate our space and figure out how to relocate our speakers to fix most of the sound problems we've had since their installation. That was done in the fall to good effect. Not that all the problems are completely gone – some linger. But overall the sound quality is finally coming close to what this semi-professional system can do. The problem remains that this is a complicated system that requires someone who has an ability to run a professional sound system. It can only be “dumbed down” so much – until something is off and needs to be fixed. I find myself in the unhappy place of being the one who understands it too well. I need a few more techies to back me up! This may need to be a staff position down the road when we need to integrate Zoom with live services to keep people included who don't feel safe to attend our services once they restart.

Social Justice Work

There are two highlights I'll mention of my work this year.

Peggy Sherman approached me over the summer to discuss the future of Interfaith Impact. Both of us have been concerned that the organization was not living up to its name “interfaith.” Almost all the organizations that are contributing members are Unitarian Universalist. The creation of Reform Jewish Voice a few years ago and the existing state wide Christian organization “Council of Churches” left us with little interfaith participation. This limited our ability to join UU Statewide Advocacy Networks on UU initiatives unless it overlapped with our Interfaith Impact work.

Peggy and I discussed our concerns with the Interfaith Impact Board at their summer retreat and the Board came

to the conclusion it was time to transition from Interfaith Impact to a UU legislative ministry / statewide advocacy network. That work was to begin in earnest in March – which coincided with the beginning of the shutdown of the state and the spike of cases in New York City that overloaded the hospitals and created great stress downstate. This work is temporarily on hold until the virus situation improves. Peggy applied for a New York State Convention of Universalists grant to get this work started which we hope will be awarded soon.

The second project was a partnership with Audrey Seidman, member of Congregation Ohav Shalom, to bring two leaders from an organization in the West Bank of Israel called “Roots.” Its director Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger, and young Palestinian Shadi Abu Awwad came as representatives to discuss the path to peace in the West Bank at several sites in the Capital Region including a welcome reception at Albany UU. The visit was success and funds were raised for the organization and their good work fostering relationships and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians.

Hudson Mohawk UU Cluster

The Cluster had two events this year. The fall event was a workshop with CB Beal to do a Transgender 101 class to help our members and friends learn, reflect on their attitudes and how we can be more welcoming in our congregation.

Our joint service became uncertain as our congregations were closed and the Doane Stuart School closed and rescinded their invitation to use their space. We worked with our guest, Paula Cole Jones, and worked out how we could do the service using Zoom. We pulled it off (with a lot of work by me) with solo music rather than our joint choir. Emma’s Revolution appeared live from California to perform two pieces. We had 377 participants at one point, one of the largest attendances we’ve had! After the presentation, Paula did a workshop on Communities of Community for us expanding on her presentation during the service. Both are available in edited form on Sam’s YouTube channel, “Sam Trumbore.”

Lifespan Religious Education

I continue doing **Meditation Workshops**, two this year, to introduce people to mindfulness meditation. Attendance continues to be strong. It continues to be a way I offer for people to deepen their growth and development process through the development of concentration and mindfulness of moment to moment experience.

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. It continues to be a helpful way to integrate new people into our congregational life.

The two classes I/we offered/co-facilitated were:

- **Transforming Hearts: Transgender Inclusion in Congregations Class** – Dan Miyake and I co-led this class together. It was a six part video training from the Transforming Hearts Collective taught by Rev. Mykal Slack and Alex Kapitan. We used this course as part of our Welcoming Congregation Renewal program. The course is for individuals and groups who want to take their knowledge and skills to the next level in terms of trans identity and how to create congregations that are fully inclusive and affirming of the full breadth of gender diversity. We explored the intersection of trans identity, spirituality, and faith community, and gained the grounding, context, and skills to transform ourselves and our congregation. Over twenty members of our congregation participated in this class.
- **Developing Coping Strategies with Tara Brach** – This class was based on the teaching of Tara Brach, a widely respected mindfulness meditation teacher and psychologist who works out of the Washington DC metro area. She has developed a mindfulness tool called RAIN that helps people who are experiencing emotional distress deescalate out of emotional reactivity and into a coping/adaptive/responsive headspace. She describes it in detail in her 2019 book titled,

“Radical Compassion.” The class worked with videos of Tara explaining RAIN and guided meditations by her as well as content from her book.

Passages

Sadly, memorial services have dominated more of my time than usual this year. The ones I have done have been for **Linda Munro, Teddy Archer, Judy Gallagher, Terry Way, John Walko and George Allen**. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the services planned for **Peggy Slocum** and **Ruth Salter** have had to be postponed. We were not able to do one for **Diana Shear** either and George has moved to Virginia. They will have a family service down there. I was also able to attend **Bunni Vaughn’s** service put on by her son in a church in Averill Park. Her daughter who is a member of that church did not want a service at Albany UU.

As for marriages, the ones I’ve got planned are in an uncertain status. We haven’t had any child dedications.

Trip to Australia and New Zealand

Philomena began receiving Social Security a year ago. One of her bucket list trips she wanted to do was go to Australia and New Zealand. We started talking about doing this in the summer of 2019 and decided the time to do it would be in the January-February time frame. This is summertime down under. In the fall we started worrying about the fires in Australia and the drought in New Zealand. Thankfully, the rain came with the beginning of our trip in the middle of January.

We had a wonderful trip with many adventures and excursions. We were very fortunate to get this trip in before the pandemic got going and international travel got shut down. I plan a slide show of our trip, delayed due to the pandemic but maybe something I can do using Zoom. We’ll see. I’m thankful for our intern, Dan Miyake, here to cover for me in case of any pastoral emergencies.

Four weeks of vacation between January and February isn’t in my contract ... so I’ll be doing a service in July, two in August and working in August. Given the restrictions we are living under, I might as well be working!

Concluding Thoughts

Days before Philomena and I left on our trip, Albany UU threw a party for me celebrating my 20 years anniversary of my ministry here. It was a great event. I was so pleased to hear people tell stories about how my ministry had made a difference in their lives. While we can’t use some of the gifts I was given, we can’t go to the Spectrum right now to watch a movie nor the New World Bistro, it will be something to look forward to someday. Thank you one and all for the great event.

We are living in challenging times we haven’t seen before. So many of the ways we “do church” from Sunday morning to circle dinners to community gatherings to our RE program can’t be done the way we’ve always done it. We might be limited in our ability to meet for months maybe even years to come. How do we stay connected and in community when we can’t get closer than six feet and must wear a mask in each other’s presence?

We have developed a format for Sunday services with Zoom that works. It isn’t as good as being together in Community Hall – but in some ways it is more accessible. Especially for those whose mobility prevents them coming on Sunday. The breakout room during the service to greet your neighbor connects people who may not know each other. So far people can hear too!

We will continue to be creative and do the best we can to connect with each other. We will continue developing virtual ways to experience community. We will continue to make meaning together, lift up our values, and provide opportunities to grow and develop.

What we are going through will last forever. We will touch and hug each other again. Until that day comes, let us continue building community together as best we can, learning new ways to bring love into the world, heal the brokenness we find, and seek a wholeness that extends beyond us.

Rev. Sam