

Minister's Annual Report (2021)

Rev. Sam Trumbore

Overview

I'm pleased to report that our congregation is coming through the pandemic much better than we feared this time last year. We've kept Sunday morning for our service strong with good attendance. So far we've had 14 new members join since our last Annual Meeting. Our members are generously supporting the budget for next year. Our members are working together and staying connected virtually through many of our continuing virtual activities. With so many vaccinated, expect more in person activities over the summer outdoors and some indoors in spaces that can be well ventilated.

Adjusting to Virtual Congregational Life

Overall, our congregation has adjusted surprisingly well to being connected virtually. Our Sunday services have continued without interruption. We continue to have visitors on Sunday, share Joys and Sorrows, enjoy music and hear inspirational messages. Our Philosophy Group, P's and Q's, Meaning Matters, Circle Dinners, and other programs continue in adapted form. Committees and Teams continue their work, in some ways with greater participation because when people are away, they can still connect to the meeting. It has gotten hard to miss meetings!

Our Building Opening Task Force came up with a way to assess whether we should be open for specific events. This has been used by staff to decide if we would accept a rental request. Few have come in and the state of the pandemic prevented us from considering any requests. This spring we are just beginning to accept a few requests for later in the year based on small numbers and social distancing.

Some of us on the Pastoral Care Associate team wondered how our more isolated individuals were doing so we developed a calling list. We were pleasantly surprised to learn most of them had found ways to adapt to their quarantine status either on-line or by taking walks with people. We're walking outside more with friends, even during cold weather, due to COVID.

Ministry and Operations Team

Last year the Ministry and Operations Team did more organizational work. With a Vision from the Board in hand to implement, we got busy.

One of our first ideas was to build a timeline with the Board to organize collective activity. We sequenced the congregational covenant completion to happen first then the Bylaws work. This was effective to keep the congregation focused on one priority at a time. Each one concluded with a congregational meeting that passed the requested change overwhelmingly.

This year the MOT took on building the 21-22 Budget for the Finance Committee to review and present to the Board. The MOT solicited and reviewed budget proposals from committees or teams that had an existing budget line as well as the Personnel Committee proposal for staff compensation. Having the MOT arbitrate the relative value of different budget proposals and set priorities was of great assistance to the Finance Committee in coming up with a budget. We are fortunate this year receiving a \$25,000 bequest from Ruth Salter's estate to the congregation for use to balance the budget. The hard choices will come next year!

One of those hard choices was presented by the MOT to the Board this year to hire a Congregational Life Coordinator (more details can be found in the MOT report). Declining membership and RE enrollment have hit the congregation quite hard. We are holding our own, but the challenges are significant going forward that we believe require staff support to reverse.

Finally, the MOT has a small team working on what technology will be required for us to have a hybrid service that continues to be streamed online even after we are back in the building. I have bought the phase one video equipment that has been tested and verified. We may be able to test the system on a couple of Sunday mornings.

Religious Services

We are now using a new three-part division of the Sunday service. The first is setting the tone and mood of the service and the story. The second part is the message that we are streaming out on Facebook. This part contains the reading, meditations, and sermon but doesn't have copyrighted music. The third part is the community section welcoming guests, congregational greeting and joys and sorrows. I've added a Prayer of Affirmation to respond to what is happening in our congregational life and the world at large that may be different from the message portion of the service. This division has worked very well. It has greatly reduced my stress not having anything before my sermon that might be disruptive. If the service runs long, it usually isn't my fault.

The technical skills for running our Zoom Sunday service exceeded what we could reasonably ask from a volunteer pool on a weekly basis and get consistently smooth presentations. Chris Jensen was hired in that role in the summer and has done a good job. At the encouragement of the Religious Services Committee, we added a rehearsal before the Sunday service to run through the service sequence with the participants. This has been very helpful at making the transitions better and catch missing bits so they don't get left to the last minute.

Randy Rosette with support from Chris, has mastered the skills of creating virtual choir performances. This along with the Albany UU Sings has helped keep our choir members musically engaged with the congregation. Recording their parts with headphones, a microphone and a camera is not the same as singing in a live choir but Randy does a masterful job of combining all the voices and video to make a beautiful presentation.

Many of our usual yearly rituals like gathering water in September, corn muffins before Thanksgiving and the Christmas Pageant couldn't be done in person. So, we improvised. I videotaped people stopping by the front of Albany UU in front of our Peace Pole to pour their water into a bowl and tell us where it was from. I baked corn muffins and distributed them with pie and soups fund raiser (also improvising distribution) as well as had neighborhood distribution points. We created a virtual pageant with costumes and invited the Saratoga UU Congregation to join us as some of their children had parts.

Being online allowed us to have joint services. We visited Schenectady UU and they visited us for a service. We've shared several multigenerational services with Saratoga UU including our Easter service. The Catskills UU congregation joined us in March. These connections between our congregations are beneficial to reinforce our sense of common identity as regional UUs that connect through our Hudson Mohawk Cluster.

Sunday Service Highlights

- **“Bringing Beloved Community to Life,”** September 20
- **“Return to Love ... Again,”** September 27
- **“Listen Within for Beyond,”** October 4
- **“Listen to the Ancestors: Indigenous People's Day,”** October 4
- **“Democracy Under Threat,”** October 18
- **“What Democracy Looks Like,”** October 25
- **“Healing Our Nation,”** November 8
- **“Healing Our Planet,”** November 15
- **“Remember to Be Still and Know,”** December 6
- **“Nature's Stillness,”** December 13
- **“Imagine What Could End, Resume ... and Begin,”** January 3
- **“Racial Healing,”** January 17
- **“Queer Theology,”** January 24
- **“The Evolutions of Community,”** February 7
- **“The Heart of Community,”** February 14
- **“Beloved Community in Practice,”** February 21
- **“The Price of Community”** February 28
- **“Commitment to Love,”** March 7
- **“Commitment to Justice,”** March 14
- **“Commitment to Peace,”** March 21 (with Catskills UU)
- **“Commitment to Action,”** March 28
- **“Eggs to Easter,”** April 4 (with Saratoga UU)
- **“Becoming Wise,”** April 25
- **“The Danger of a Single Story,”** May 2
- **“Two Stories That Merged into One,”** May 9
- **“No Last Chapter in Our UU Story,”** May 23

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

<http://albanyuu.org/sermons/>

Social Justice Work

I usually go to a lot of protests and actions as part of serving as a minister in Albany. This year however I've been far more cautious about attending rallies. Being fully vaccinated now should change that ... but masked and keeping appropriate distance.

That said, when George Floyd was murdered there was no way I could stay away from the **marches and rallies**. The elections got me out on the streets as did the Anti-Asian Hate rally in March. I attended the Saturday morning Troy Black Lives Matter gatherings organized by Anne Marie Haber until the appearance of a more infectious variant that got me off the streets. UU the Vote gave us another way to be active at home sending postcards and making phone calls to get people registered and to the polls.

One organization I spent time meeting with leaders and encouraging our congregation to connect with is **Braver Angels**. They are a group that strives to bring Blues and Reds together in dialogue using carefully designed, respectful debate format. Their programs are quite good and helpful to understand both sides better. Sadly, I worry that people locked into their ideologies and conspiracy theories are not open to this kind of approach.

Another organization that got off the ground this year was **New York UU Justice**. It is the successor organization to Interfaith Impact. Interfaith Impact was primarily UU but had a small number of non-UU members. The Interfaith Impact Board felt it was time for it to end so a new organization doing mostly the same work could come to life that was founded as a UU State Action Network. This allows us to join with other UU State Action Networks on common projects (like UU the Vote) and it also opens access to UU specific funding sources. Peggy Sherman has been a visionary partner in helping get this organization going and deserves great appreciation for her energy, time, and support of this effort.

Another great program that is just getting started is the **Conflict Transformation Working Group**. You'll find their report also in this year's Annual Report. I've been involved in helping it get started too. For our congregation to live into its mission of welcoming everybody and our vision of inclusion and building Beloved Community, we must develop our skills in working creatively with the conflicts that arise as we grow and change.

Hudson Mohawk UU Cluster

The pandemic has curtailed our Cluster activity. We did have our joint service in April however with President Susan Frederick-Gray as our theme speaker. Last year the virtual service was a challenge to overcome. This year the process was much smoother given our greater online experience. Susan's sermon was good and the discussion with her after the service even better. Many stayed for the conversation and got their questions answered. Being online in some ways can bring us closer together.

Lifespan Religious Education

I continue doing **Meditation Workshops**, one in the fall and three in the winter, to introduce people to mindfulness meditation. This year we did them online. I streamed on Zoom from B-8 while people joined me from home. It was a little challenging for folks to meditate at home due to the ease of distraction. Yet people did find it valuable. Even online, these workshops continue to be a way to deepen their growth and development process through the development of concentration and mindfulness of moment-to-moment experience.

My **Sunday morning meditation** has adjusted to be at 8:30 to 9:20am in the morning. We spent the year listening to 10 minute segments of a basic 12 CD course in Insight Meditation taught by Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein. The instruction segment is followed by 20 minutes of meditation, 10 minutes of conversation about the segment or meditation questions. We conclude with 8 minutes of loving kindness guided meditation. Attendance ranges from 16 to 24 on any given Sunday.

Meaning Matters continues to be a way I connect monthly 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 class/programs I offered or co-facilitated were:

- **Connect with Three** – Given the isolation many were experienced quarantined in their homes by themselves, I thought people might enjoy a way to meet new people using the capabilities of Zoom breakout rooms. My idea was to take all the people who came, divide them up in pairs to spend fifteen minutes together in three rounds, regrouping people each time with new folks. The people who participated initially enjoyed it but participation dwindled. I tried to run it multiple times a week, then once a week. I may have just run it too many times. I stopped it in January as enthusiasm lagged.
- **Racial Healing Class** – Through a recommendation of the book, [*The Racial Healing Handbook*](#), by Anneliese A. Singh, I reached out to Jaye Holly to see if she might be willing to co-lead a class with me on it. She was. We decided on an 8-week class format. 28 participants signed up for the class including three participants of color. Jaye and I worked out ways for the class to be effective taking advantage of Zoom's features for breakout rooms. I've never had a class that I've led that so many people registered for and ALL of them showed up. People were hungry to work on racial healing. Not only did they sign up, but the participants also continued coming till the end. Lots of learning, growth and development happened for the participants.

Passages

The pandemic was quite disruptive to memorial services. We couldn't have the kind of memorial services we normally would with people crowded into the Sanctuary or Community Hall for the service. And there could be no reception to follow it. **Peggy Slocum's** son Peter had an outdoor service in Peggy's backyard that I videorecorded then later rebroadcast in Zoom format. Al DeSalvo did a similar backyard service for **Ruth Salter** that also became a Zoom memorial. Backyard in person services were not options for **Harry Taber, Martha Schroeder, or Ted Wright** who died during the winter months. I did Zoom services for all three that were well received. While receptions are not possible after a Zoom service, online conversation after the service can be very healing and meaningful.

I did **two weddings**, both outside. One on the steps of the New York State Museum for **Dan and Kristen Tibbitts** and in **Lucas Johnson and Julie Maresco's** parent's backyard.

Personnel

In January we **said goodbye to Sapphire Correa** who was headed off to do an internship for her masters program at U Albany. Sadly we couldn't have a party for her but the staff did have a Christmas Party outdoors in Leah Purcell's backyard where we appreciated her.

Then at the end of January, **Leah Purcell announced that she would be retiring in June**. That set in motion a flurry of activity on my part to navigate this transition. The first possibility was to see if we could hire an interim for next year. After consulting with the UUA staff person, this didn't look good. Few people are in transition right now because of the pandemic. Then, upon Leah's recommendation, I found the Guild of Interim Religious Professionals. These are folks who will do the interim part of a transition year as consultants. After a conversation with **Elizabeth Baldes**, our current Religious Education Coordinator working in partnership with Leah, she was **willing to be Acting Director of Religious Education next year** if she could have a **support RE assistant and an Interim Consultant**. A search team was assembled of a Board representative (Jan McCracken), a Personnel representative (Elizabeth Berberian), two Religious Education Council Representatives (Michael Hornsby and Alison Hart) and Elizabeth Baldes and myself. We advertised the position and solicited applications from people recommended by Leah. Elizabeth and I reviewed five applicants and submitted three to the search team. The search team interviewed the three and selected one. At this writing, I'm currently in negotiations with that candidate and we'll be checking references too.

Leah has been a great partner in the ministry of our congregation. Many have appreciated her stories on Sunday morning. You don't see how our staff works together behind the scenes to keep everything together. Leah developed her skills becoming a Certified Director of Religious Education. She served on the national board of the Liberal Religious Education Directors Association (LREDA) with distinction. She developed a

wide network of connections bringing us innovative ideas, curriculum and ways to effectively operate a RE program. We worked collaboratively over the 14 years of her service. While the declining birth rate has hit us hard, we have a strong program with motivated volunteers. I expect our consultant will have much praise for us as well as suggestions for new directions.

I'm excited about the potential work we'll do with the interim process. Leah is leaving us with a strong program. My hope is we can make it even better and more attractive to reverse the decline we've seen in families in the last few years.

Running for UUA Board

I was approached by the UUA Nominating Committee to run for the UUA Board and accepted. I am running against a fellow running by petition who has written a book titled, *Used To Be UU*. He is running against the current administration of the UUA. I've got my campaign gearing up and hope to be elected. If so, there would be a significant workload, and I would have to clear my agenda of some other outside activities to make room. I am honored to be asked and welcome the opportunity to help shape the direction of our UUA. I think it would be a capstone for my years in ministry and service to Unitarian Universalism. Possible negative impact on my ministry at Albany UU would be counterbalanced by the greater awareness of UU trends our congregation might be able to use. It will also help us get UUA services we might want or need. Overall, I believe it will be beneficial for both our congregation and my ministry.

Concluding Thoughts

Much as we've adjusted to being virtual, we strongly desire to be back in person. Rest assured as soon as it is safe to do so, we will be back in the building on Sunday morning. But that opening may come with small groups first. RE classes may lead first or they may lag depending on the recommendations from the UUA, New York State, and the CDC. We're encouraged by the UUA to center the concerns of all ages and abilities not just the middle-aged able-bodied folks that want things to return to normal.

And what will our new normal be? Rest assured as much as possible will remain on Zoom to maximize participation. I expect a lot of our meetings may stay on Zoom for the foreseeable future, saving a lot of fossil fuel. Office hours for staff are likely to be different with more working at home. We've discovered a lot of what we do can just as easily be done virtually than in person.

Yet in person will remain the best way for us to experience community. There have been real losses this year, especially for our children and youth. Rest assured we'll do what it takes to get us back together again.

Rev. Sam