

Minister's Annual Report (2022)

Rev. Sam Trumbore

Overview

Our congregation continues to be quite resilient to the many challenges of continuing our services, programs and operations in the middle of a pandemic. People keep finding us and wanting to join with all of the challenges and limitations of striving to keep people safe. The program that is hardest hit is our programming for children and youth. Yet somehow we are muddling through and offering services and programs that people find inspiring and meaningful. Please be appreciative of how hard your staff has been working to hold it all together

The Continuing COVID Pandemic

The 2021 COVID terror was the Delta variant. In the beginning of the fall, people were still being very careful to avoid getting COVID, willing to wear masks, and social distance, and grateful to get vaccinated in the beginning of the year. Then came Omicron in the winter with a tremendous wave of infection. We shut down our services in December. That meant we had a second Christmas Eve service in an empty sanctuary. While being more contagious, Omicron turned out to be a less severe form of infection on average. Combined with the fatigue of entering our third year of COVID, more and more people were ready to be done with it by spring. Masks started coming off, social distancing reduced, vaccine checks ended, theaters and restaurants were fully open for business. It is now as if people are choosing to go back to normal.

We started the year open for services with no singing, fully masked, and with socially distant seating. We are ending the year with some distance still provided but with voluntary distancing in rows. We continue to broadcast our services on Zoom but there is increasing pressure for our choir to start up in the fall whatever COVID is doing. It is almost as if we've decided to put COVID in the flu category and just move on ... unless a particularly deadly variant appears.

Zoom is becoming our default way to meet. This is making it easier to have meetings since no one has to drive in to 405 Washington. We do have the ability to do multi-platform meetings with people in a room and participants on Zoom. We expect that to continue, partly to reduce the driving required to participate in our congregation.

Finally, having come down with a mild case of COVID, and witnessing the wave of Omicron BA2 sweeping through our area, soon most of us will have had this virus and/or have been vaccinated. With anti-viral medications like Paxlovid, we need to adjust to the new normal and resume as much of our congregational life as possible while continuing to provide as much of our congregational life as possible through the Internet.

Multi-Platform Services, Events and Meetings

One of the ways we are doing that is by putting our services out on Zoom and Facebook as well as having them in person on Sunday morning. This has required purchasing high quality remote control video cameras, a camera controller, video switching equipment, and extra computer power for the live stream going out to the Internet and a computer to display our Google slides. We also needed a large screen (75 inches) and stand so people in Community Hall could see the same things going out on Zoom and Facebook. While it is quite time consuming to move this new equipment, all of it is mobile and can be relocated to broadcast from the Sanctuary (or any other spot in our building).

The technical challenge of all this effort has been significant. I've been happy to use my technical skills to design, purchase, connect and program this system. To run it, we need a Multi-Media Technician (MMT) to monitor Zoom, advance the slides, and monitor the audio. We also need a person controlling the three cameras and selecting the right one (or the slide deck) to send out to everyone to watch. This has required building a team of tech folks as we need two every Sunday to run the equipment. Thanks to Chris Jensen, Kate Pierce, Dick Dana, Fred Eames, Geoff Abbas, Chuck Manning and Kathy Harris and glad to have Kevin Yeh joining the team (room for more!).

The good news about all this technical work is it has made what goes on in our congregation much more visible to the world through Facebook. People are visiting us there and then deciding to come check us out in person. I had been dreaming of being able to do the kind of production we are now doing for a very long time. I'm sorry it took COVID to get us there, but it has opened the door for membership growth and the promotion of Unitarian Universalism in the Albany area.

In addition to broadcasting from Community Hall, we've outfitted two mobile carts with large screens, a small 'cube' computer, a sensitive microphone on an extended USB cable, and a camera on the top of the screen so meetings and small events can be easily shared using Zoom. We use them for Meditation on Sunday morning, Meaning Matters, P's and Q's, Finance Committee meetings for example. People are quite satisfied with this solution bringing in remote participants on Zoom and allowing everyone to both see and hear.

Religious Services

We wanted to start in September with a big splash. COVID had faded in June and it was looking like we could get back to normal. That was not to be. Tammy and I set up little pods of chairs that were measured to be six feet apart. We needed to do our water gathering remotely again. We didn't have the celebration in Channing Hall we had hoped so we met at the Henry Hudson Town Park instead. Attendance stayed low when we did start in person a week later than our usual fall start date. We halted in person services in December then started up again in March. Attendance this spring has been much better with a higher number of visitors than usual. Even though the infection rate is rising all around us, people are still willing to come and be in person.

COVID delayed several memorial services this year hoping for lower infection rates to have them in person rather than on-line. Thankfully the ones we did have for Susan Thompson, Judy Hanson, Rodger Fink, Richard Brewer, and Tom Hotalen did not cause any spread of disease. Masks do seem to be remarkably effective in preventing spread.

Sunday Service Highlights

- **“The Art of Listening (with Philomena Moriarty)** September 26
- **“Communal Aspirations,”** October 3
- **“Pipelines, Climate Change and Indigenous People,”** October 10
- **“Impasse,”** October 24
- **“Truth Matters,”** November 7
- **“The Minority Opinion,”** November 14
- **“Teaching Peace, Embodying Peace,”** November 21
- **“Transcendental Roots of Justice,”** November 28
- **“The Peaceful Joy of Frozen Ground,”** December 5
- **“The Joyful Presence of the Holy,”** December 12
- **“Zero Sum Dilemma,”** January 9
- **“Sum of Us Solution,”** January 16
- **“Insights from the Cushion,”** April 3
- **“Living with Hopelessness,”** April 10
- **“Evolution of Beauty,”** May 1
- **“In Praise of Nurturers,”** May 8
- **“Reclaiming UGLY,”** May 15

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/>

Adult Education

I continue to lead three Meaning Matters classes using the theme-of-the-month approach. Attendance has been good and we've met mostly online and not in person. Some groups will have their final meeting in person on a member's outdoor deck to conclude the year.

I continue to offer Meditation on Sunday morning that has a consistent attendance of 14-20 people. It has been a side door through which people have been introduced to our congregation then become members and/or financial supporters of our congregation. I've also offered Friday night and Saturday Meditation workshops for people of all experience levels.

The one book focused class that I offered was on the book *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler. Over thirteen weeks we read and discussed two chapters a week paired with a Podcast on each chapter by Toshi Reagan and Adrienne Marie Brown, two Black women who cherish the book. Each podcast on each chapter had discussion questions which we used in the group. I pulled the questions out of the transcripts of the podcast as well as notes on each chapter. This turned out to be a lot of work but it greatly enriched the quality of the discussion in each class.

One of the results of the work we did with RE Consultant Michele Grove was to highlight interest in increasing the offerings of Adult Education. This will be a project to take on next fall.

Personnel

Rather than having an Interim RE Director after Leah Purcell's retirement last year, we asked Elizabeth Baldes to be our Acting DRE and we contracted with Michele Grove to come in and work with us to do the parts of the job we would have done if we had an Interim RE Director. That included having Michele preach in September and March, lead several fall weekend interview sessions and some consulting work to help us evaluate our program and begin looking forward. COVID has been devastating to our RE program and Elizabeth has been quite creative and energetic in seeking ways to keep our program functioning under difficult circumstances.

The Board has agreed with the recommendation that we return to 40 hours for Religious Education Director and the RE Assistant positions, with the Director moving back to 30 hours which was the case for Leah before retiring. The assistant will remain at 10 hours. Paula Brewer has been doing a great job in that position. The Board also agreed to retain the Youth Advisor at 10 hours. Adrian Cattell was hired this year to serve in that position and has also been doing a great job. We will be well staffed to start rebuilding our RE program this fall.

Randy Rosette and Chris Jensen have done a fabulous job providing music for our services on Sunday morning. That came to an end in December and catalyzed assembling a Music Director Search Team and began our search for a Music Director. After looking at many resumes and interviewing candidates, we've settled on Olga Martinez. Stay tuned for more details in June.

Inflation was a significant concern this year. We've given all non-ministerial staff a 5% increase to help with this financial pressure.

The position of Congregational Life Coordinator is part of the budget for the 2022-23 year at 10 hours. The main purpose of this position is to address the loss of membership over the last 8 years mostly linked to declining RE enrollment and the effects of COVID. The key idea of this position is not to hire someone to do the work but rather to find a person who can organize and lead the work that needs to be done by volunteers. This is a modest investment in staff that we hope will yield significant gains

in membership.

Sabbatical Time

.I am very grateful to be granted two months of sabbatical time in February and March this year. I was glad to have some time for renewal.

Philomena and I began my time away in San Diego where the UU Ministers Association held a delayed Convocation for continuing education. After that event we flew to Maui for 12 days for some rest, relaxation and renewal – a very pleasant experience. The beginning of March, I spent two weeks in meditation at the Insight Meditation Society Forest Refuge. This was a different kind of renewal work, deepening my meditation practice and honing my concentration skills.

I'm so glad we didn't have any pastoral crises nor did any members die while I was on sabbatical. I am thankful I had a team of ministers, Lynn Ashley, Dave Munro, and Bobbi Place, ready to respond if needed. I returned to seven weeks of intense activity, getting a case of COVID, and Philomena falling and breaking her leg and a couple of ribs. Hoping for some ease in the coming weeks.

UUA Board work

Serving on the UUA Board as a Trustee hasn't been quite as stressful and demanding as I anticipated. The hardest part has been the longer meetings that stretch through Friday and Saturday, especially if I have Sunday morning responsibilities. I've worked on team doing a major revision of UUA Bylaws to make them more flexible and adaptable, removing many items that belong in Board Policy. The UUA Board is very constrained in the Bylaws. They limit the Board's ability to innovate and adapt to changing conditions. I've also been learning the UUA finances and been asked to step into the role of Financial Secretary for the Board. It will be a chance to learn some useful accounting principles that might be helpful for our Finance Committee.

Concluding Thoughts

The challenges of being a religious community never end. For over two years it has been the pandemic. This past week it has been racist violence in a Buffalo supermarket. Controversies over how to spend Strategic Reserve money, whether to take down and/or modify and/or replace a quilt and to pass the Eighth Principle are part of our congregational life together. We will not all agree – yet we can disagree without being disagreeable. We can have different opinions, just as we hold different beliefs, and still maintain our sense of community and connection with each other.

May we be more about nurturing our caring relationships with each other than nursing our grievances and opinions about what words should go where and what money should be spent on what. At the end of the congregational meeting, we will still share a core set of values reflected in our Principles and our Congregational Covenant that binds us together.

We all want what is best for the wellbeing of our congregation even if we don't agree about how to support it. Let us keep that in mind Sunday at our Annual Meeting and be sure to stop in to debrief with the Conflict Transformation Working Group at 5pm that evening with your favorite beverage.

Rev. Sam