

Minister's Annual Report May, 2022

Our formal relationship of minister and congregation began on December 1, 2022, just as the Omicron variant of Covid-19 was beginning to present itself. The worship committee went ahead with its previously arranged plans for Sunday worship in-person in the sanctuary, giving me a chance to attend services, meet as many people as possible, and spend some time with DRE Lee and the youth and adults in the Religious Education program. I lead the Christmas Eve service, as we practiced what on my first day seemed like extreme protocols. They turned out to be quite prudent – perhaps even prescient.

Over the holidays many contracted the virus (thankfully nobody in our congregation died), so we went to all-virtual via Zoom for the month of January. We were surprised to find how rich the conversations were afterward, which prompted us to devise a plan for two services on the Sundays when I lead worship: one in-person, in the sanctuary, with all the protocols in place; and one afterward via Zoom, followed by a sermon reflection.

Except for a couple of special exceptions, we've continued with this model until now, and will do so through the end of the church year. At first, there were worries that two services might bifurcate the congregation, but that has not proven to be the case. Regulars to the Zoom service express to me appreciation and a deeper sense of connection. And they come to the outdoor services when offered if they feel safe.

I've spent much of my time in the last few months getting to know you, through one-to-one conversations and group conversations I call "Beverages and Banter," my model of what many ministers call "Community Office Hours." I've had the pleasure of conversation with well over 50 people as of the time of this writing, and have more planned. It will take a while to meet everyone in this way, but it will happen. It really is an honor to spend time like this.

I've had the pleasure of attending meetings of virtually every committee in the congregation, and have been pleased by the obvious health present. In many ways, this congregation functions like a family-sized church in which people are able to bring their best skills to the places where they are most needed. The Coordinating Council, aka "the Sisterhood of Getting it Done," could serve as a role model for congregations of any size the way it nurtures and supports natural leaders while keeping lines of communication open. I also believe a slightly different form of leadership development could work well here, now that human and financial resources are shrinking because of the pandemic and other universal demographic stressors. Current leaders I've spoken with are interested in identifying those who *could* be great leaders, and mentoring them as they gain skills in areas that interest them. This could work especially well to meet the needs of parents of young families.

DRE Lee and I have a mantra that many in the congregation could probably recite by heart: "our goal is to nurture a generation of youth who grow up to choose Unitarian Universalism as their faith because we belong to them and they belong to us." To that end, we've been working to create more intergenerational services, in which children are welcomed, included, spoken directly to, and where get to see their own artwork displayed in the sanctuary. We're starting to use the sanctuary differently, even rearranging the seating for Easter.

One way we've used our sanctuary is for memorials, which hadn't happened in the space for two years. I have officiated two memorial services so far, one for a UU from Delaware and one for the daughter of member Ann Seemann. Two more memorials are coming up for members Nina Collier and Dorothy Devine. We also have lost Rod Driver, whose memorial was held elsewhere.

You all have been very generous with your contributions to the Agape Fund, from which \$1,150 has been disbursed to individuals and organizations, leaving a significant balance.

It's been a good few months, with lots of laughter and emergencies and some sadness. Everything has made us stronger, because it's all had the

effect of deepening our relationships, building even more trust among congregants and staff, and getting us back into congregational life that looks “normal” again.

I look forward to another year with you all as we redefine “normal.” Isn’t that the job of Unitarian Universalists?

In Peace,
Rev. Denis Letourneau Paul