

Minister's Annual Report May, 2025

For almost three years now, we have been summarizing our (wordy!) mission statement with six easy-to-remember words: Welcoming, Loving, Growing Spiritually, Seeking Justice. As I did last year, I'll use them as an organizing tool for looking at the state of our congregation — from my perspective as your minister — at the end of this impactful year.

Welcoming and Loving

I hear it all the time from people joining us for worship, memorials and other events: visitors to our congregation appreciate our welcoming warmth, our gentle hospitality, and our ability to accept them just as they are, even when they are feeling messy in their grief. We are a beacon of love in a hostile world.

Your Membership Committee and Greeters do a great job of welcoming everyone at the door. I can't tell you how often I've heard "I kept coming back because of Val," to name just one. And the truth is, we are all greeters to varying degrees, so we are all responsible for creating the kind of lively organization people want to join.

Quarterly community meals (including two breakfasts this year), weekly Beverages and Banter gatherings, and purely, social events like hikes and kayaking continue to give us opportunities to get to know one another with more depth and appreciation. Keep coming. Keeping being involved. Keep inviting your friends. You never know who might really *need* a place like this at any given moment.

Growing Spiritually

Your Worship Committee continues to do an amazing job creating meaningful and interesting services during the weeks your 3/4-time minister is not leading worship. Together we work from a diversity of experiences, theologies, styles and expectations to meet your wide variety of needs.

Your Music Committee did an amazing job during the first four months of the calendar year creating music for worship, while your Music Director Search Committee listened deeply and responded to your expressed needs. I am looking forward to working with your new Music Director Ami Pienknagura to integrate music into the experience of the whole congregation, so that we all can share the experience of making music together.

In the last year, I've been impressed again and again by your willingness to embracing experimentation and change in worship, from seating arrangements to the liturgy week to week. Even the monthly Meditation Circle is followed by conversation about how we're maintaining our grounding as the world seems more hostile to our values.

The Wunder Academy of Metamorphosis, our summer program for children and youth begun by DRE Lee Cowan, felt like a huge success last August. By design, it wasn't a particularly large program first time out, but it was robust. The kiddos seemed to love it, parents appreciated it, and adults without children in the program who served as volunteers showed up with smiles and left with stories of appreciation. We learned a lot, and we are primed for even more spiritual growth as we expand enrollment this year.

Seeking Justice

Your Social Justice Advisory Council is staying upright, even as participants feel like they're constantly drinking from the proverbial firehose. They are driving forces behind the South County Social Justice Coalition, The Legislative Ministry of RI, and numerous other Justice-oriented organization in the state and region. They're synthesizing information, organizing our responses, and bringing us events that help us stay active, informed, and a resource to the community.

We continue to host events with the Tomaquag Museum, the Memorial Documentary Film Series and the Beyond the Binary conference are three examples of the ways in which we can educate the community, make safe space for at-risk groups, and learn in the process.

The Hurdis Fund continues to make a difference in south Kingstown and here at UUCSC by providing crucial funding. Thanks to their support, the parents and youth involved in the Wunder Academy are ready to be active participants in the justice challenges of the wider community and in the nation, through direct action, volunteering, and accompaniment of neighbors at risk.

Challenges

In a world that feels like it's on fire, we are all living in the tension of wanting to hold on to safe spaces like our beloved congregation while also making it into more of a reflection of our values: justice, equity, transformation, pluralism, interconnectedness and generosity with LOVE always at the center.

Meanwhile, we are grappling with evolving understandings of concepts that are getting more complicated, like accountability, transparency and even covenant. Your Committee on Ministry is committed to answering your charge to facilitate regular conversations about our challenges, honoring and encouraging your vulnerability, honesty, humility and grace. And we all need to remember that none of us will get our needs met every single time. They are too complex and varied. But together, we can appreciate those times when needs are met, even if they aren't our own.

I always say that we have 50 ways of getting a hold of each other, so none of them work very well. With every form of media vying for our limited attention, perfectly effective mass communication is impossible. So, I want to riff on JFK's most famous quote: ask not "why didn't I hear about this," but ask "how can I help spread the word?"

All of these challenges can make it feel like there's a separation between "upstairs" and "downstairs." We need to all be better at engaging with the WHOLE congregation, so that we can really and truly be united as one community committed to welcoming, loving, growing spiritually and seeking justice. I know we can do this. The energy you all give to getting it done is a constant source of inspiration for me. And I know most of you feel the same way.

In Peace,
Rev. Denis Paul