

Minister's Report

JUNE, 2017

1. It is expected that the minister present a written report monthly to the board. This report has taken many forms over the years largely because I let the board determine the format, type and depth of information presented each month. Some boards have sought greater accountability regarding my time. To that end I have included in the past a list of meetings attended through the month and bulleted outlines of important conversations (other than pastoral) or other issues I confronted since the last board meeting. Some boards, on the other hand, prefer brief outlines of big picture issues regarding the congregation. That is what was expected this last year. I created short reports that included two or three issues about which I thought the board should be aware. Please let me know what kind of information you'd like me to provide each month. In addition, it might be worth noting that these reports used to become part of the official minutes of each board meeting but it was decided two years ago not to do that anymore. I will assume that is the intention of this board as well, unless you tell me otherwise.
2. Sabbatical was a wonderful experience. I had no idea how much I needed it, frankly. There's so much to say about all the things I learned. They fall into three categories.
 - a. Personal Spiritual Practice
 - b. Congregational Growth (Spoiler Alert: You have to really *want* to grow)
 - c. Creating Climate Neutral Congregations (A national program)

Personal Spiritual Practice: The only consistent charge I was given leading up to sabbatical was to make sure I recharge. I admit freely that I had no idea how burned out I was or how much I needed this break. The month of January was spent in hours of meditation each day. Over the course of the five months, I reengaged my practice of deep silence daily and became acutely aware of a UU deficit in spiritual practice. I then opened conversations with colleagues about how we might inspire a spiritual revival in UU circles. So many UUs – and Americans in general – crave spiritual experience but haven't found something that really grounds them. UUs often reject more theologically than they accept, leaving too many of us spiritually hungry. I am committed to creating ways for us to be fed and for my own practice to continue, lest I find myself in a similarly dangerous position.

Congregational Growth (multicultural and otherwise): The methodology for my research can fit into two categories. First, I read a lot of written material regarding growth. Most, but not all, of this was theoretical work created by congregational consultants. Second, I spoke with ministers of congregations that have wanted to grow. I gathered information regarding both successes and failures. More congregations that want to grow fail than succeed. This is particularly true of congregations that wanted to grow in diversity. The biggest takeaway for me is that small congregations create cultures that keep them small. To grow requires a shift in culture. This has never been more true than it is right now as religion is shifting to the margins of American society. There are success stories of sustained growth and new congregational culture and I'm hoping we use those stories to guide us. I'd like to start a task force (which Sue and Greg have already agreed to join) so we can talk about translating some ideas into action. I understand that the pledge drive increased anxiety for a handful of members. This isn't unusual either in light of changing demographics or during a ministerial sabbatical. I am hoping we can corral that energy into this task force, giving us a team of committed members to work this problem together.

Climate Neutral Congregations: A third task for this sabbatical was the creation of climate neutral congregations. This idea came from GreenFaith Executive Director, Rev. Fletcher Harper. Fletcher called me in the fall with this idea and was pitching it to me because, in his estimation, an out of the box idea is more likely to gain traction in Unitarian Universalism than in other denominations. Over these five months, I created a national team of leading ministers to take this charge seriously with the idea that we

are designing a program that will be rolled out in our churches first, and then, through GreenFaith, into the faith community nationally. We hit a snag at the end of March when GreenFaith didn't get the grant they needed to hire a staff person for this work. This meant that the resources we want to create will need to be created by us or put on hold until they are able to move forward. That's what we decided to do and will pick it up again this summer in partnership with GreenFaith.

3. As you know, Rita is leaving us as of June 16th. Some of you know how time consuming it was to find her, and how lucky we were to get someone both qualified and easy to work with. She was a gift while I've been gone. Ron and Sarah both have an exit interview on their radar. Rita assured me that the only reason she's leaving is that she needs more money. The one thing she told me about the job is that people are very nice but she's surprised by the lack of institutional support regarding the building. She said that she's been surprised by how much facility maintenance she has to confront each week which is largely because we don't have an active team of people who show up to fix things the way she's used to in Croton. Instead, she's left finding vendors and being available and following up which takes more of her time than she'd expected. She suggests we are clear with the next person about this expectation.
4. I have returned to a congregation in conflict. I admit to being disappointed about that. There is a pattern in this congregation that has been here for decades that is again becoming apparent. Systems theory tells us that systems work regardless of the individual players, that unless a system is intentionally altered, we will play out the same patterns for generations. I had been told about this particular pattern by past ministers and DREs, had seen it play out in my tenure before and I see it once again. My hope for us is that we don't shy away from it. It's tempting not to call it conflict which feeds into our conflict-avoidance, allowing us not to address the deeper problem. I'm hoping the board and Committee on Ministry can look honestly at what's happening and help to create a healthier narrative that sling-shots us onto a different path. (One of my concerns about the current conflict is that I have heard from some long term members that they are thinking of leaving the congregation. I realize that newer members don't know what's happening, but if people who have been here for many years are too angry or tired to stick this out, I'm sure we'll see newer families head for the door as this moves into the mainstream. We have to find ways to remain relevant and vibrant, thus my hope we create a healthier narrative to move us forward. In the meantime, I will continue to encourage folks to stay with us through this. The secondary issue with them telling me this is that I can see people feeling like they need to take sides which is worrisome at best.)
5. Since my return, pastoral care needs have been extremely high. This is not unexpected. One of the things to which I want to recommit is pastoral care, so this lets me prioritize that very quickly. I'm aware, though, that to meet all of our pastoral care needs might mean I can't do everything else I've been doing. I'd like to focus this next year on preaching/worship, and pastoral care. I understand that institutional work is also necessary, but I might need to pull back from some of that to keep to a 6 day week. (Some of the burnout I experienced was due to regular 7 day work weeks. I have concluded that not to be sustainable.)
6. In my Letter of Agreement, the congregation stipulates that the 4 weeks of vacation and 4 weeks of study leave I get each year are to be taken in the months of July and August. I am not sure that's realistic given the amount of work I'm facing at the moment. Would you be willing to allow me to move a few of those weeks into the program year? Even if it's just two, that would be helpful. Three might be better, but I know that my being gone when we're at full capacity can be very disruptive.
7. General Assembly, starting with Ministry Days, will begin on June 18 and run through June 25. I will return to the office on June 27. I am reachable by phone, text or email through the week and will post interesting or important information on Facebook while I'm gone. General Assembly, for those who are unfamiliar, is the way our denomination (and most other Protestant denominations) do our business. Delegates from every congregation discuss the critical theological and social issues of the day. This year we will also elect a new President.

8. Our new intern will begin at the end of August or early September. He is with us half time for two years. We are working on his schedule and duties which will align with his other work and educational needs in addition to our own. Over the summer he is taking Clinical Pastoral Education at Bridgeport Hospital. This work is necessary before he begins serving our congregation.