

# 2015-2016 President's Report

Unitarian-Universalist Church of Nashua

June 5, 2016

## OVERVIEW

I'd like begin by going back to June of last year. We were just ending a three-year interim period filled with exploration, self-discovery, and self-assessment. We had experimented with a few things and, frankly, were still learning how to experiment gracefully. We had just finished developing our Covenant of Right Relations to remind ourselves that being in relationship with each other is tricky business and requires regular, good faith efforts to maintain. But our hard work, and that of our search committee, was about to pay off. Indeed, we had just voted to settle a new minister after a whirlwind, one-week dating period.

I think it's fair to say that we were ready, maybe a little tired too, but ready, and very eager to begin the next chapter. If you can remember, there was a palpable sense of excitement in those days after our unanimous decision to call Allison. We had done it. We had made it through the long winter of interim (and a rather long winter itself), come out on the other end stronger, and the promise of a new spring beckoned.

I would like to report that spring has indeed come. The past year has provided example after example of this new season in our shared journey together.

- By all accounts, Rev. Allison is everything we hoped she'd be and more. For the first few months of the year I was constantly impressed with her skill and grace as she tackled each new responsibility. From sermons to meetings to policy governance to leading the staff, whatever the charge, she handled it well. In fact, somewhere along the way I ceased being amazed and now just assume that, whatever it is, Allison is up for the task. If an alligator dropped from the sky, I'm quite sure Allison would know just what to do.
- Sandra, our Interim Director of Faith Formation, has been another wonderful addition to our family and so many of you have told me how delighted you are that she'll be here another year. Many of you have also given me dirty looks for that clause in her contract that precludes her from staying on permanently, but I assure you that was an interim requirement.
- Everywhere I look I see energy and excitement. I see a little more enthusiasm and a little more passion. I hear it in your voices, I see it in your eyes, and I can practically feel it radiating up from these old floorboards.
- This year's stewardship campaign was another sizable step forward and a tangible measure of your financial commitment to the future of this church.
- It's a little hard to describe, but I feel like I see us doing more. When I listen to you describe your team or committee's plans, I hear a note of boldness I have not often heard before. I hear us talking more confidently about our future and I see folks raising their eyes to the horizon, looking at where we'd like to go.
- I see more people in the pews on Sunday. I see more new faces sitting beside me and more new faces signing the membership book. I also see more young people in our FF classes.

In general, I see little changes everywhere I look, not brash, uncomfortable changes, but bold, courageous steps that make good things just a little bit better. In a sense, I see us unfolding our wings, testing our newfound strength, and an eagerness to take flight.

Simply put, it seems like we are living into all that promise we felt last spring. We all seem to be rededicating ourselves to our shared vision for this place as more than just a Sunday morning shelter. Now, I don't mean to diminish our past efforts in any way or suggest that this is an entirely new phenomenon. What's new, I'd suggest, is the pervasive sense that we are on the cusp of becoming the congregation we have always wanted to be.

To that end, I want to pause and acknowledge all of the hard work that brought us to this point. Part of the magic of this moment is that it arrives, as it always does, at the culmination of many efforts. The seeds so many of you have sown over the years have laid the foundation for this moment. I have only been in leadership for a few years, but in my time on the board I have seen how each step builds on the ones before it. It can seem like a surprise when everything suddenly seems to be going just right. You should not be surprised. Your shared efforts—both big and small—over many, many years have set the stage for this point in time.

## **GOVERNANCE**

For several years the Board of Trustees has been working hard to more deeply understand policy based governance and complete our transition to that model. Allison's arrival provided an excellent opportunity to take the final step. The missing piece for us was a person prepared to be both our minister and our Executive Director. Allison has ably stepped into that leadership role and, for what feels like the first time, we are fully living policy based governance. Together we have spent quite a bit of time this year asking questions and making sure we were filling our roles appropriately.

In a nutshell, under policy governance, the Executive Director should be handling all of the operational tasks associated with running the church and the Board of Trustees should be focusing on setting a vision for the church and monitoring progress. At a leadership level, one of our big efforts this year was focusing on who was supposed to do what. Indeed, you'll find signs of these changes throughout the Annual Meeting Agenda itself.

- Many of the proposed bylaw changes are rooted in an awareness that our bylaws were not quite aligned with policy based governance.
- You'll note that Allison, as Executive Director, is presenting the budget this year, a budget she'll use to lead the organization in the direction we've asked her to take us.
- You'll also see some time allotted for a Strategic Plan. This is a document that our policies have called for, but we've never quite managed to create. In fact, this is a perfect example of how much of this year came together. Allison, like all people new to an organization, asked a lot of questions. Many of those questions involved discussions about expectations. In so doing, we have had an opportunity to align our policies with our actions.

There have been changes throughout the organization as well.

- It should come as no surprise that there's no way an Executive Director can manage an organization the size of ours without a great deal of help. Our excellent staff has been asked to do more and more, and has consistently risen to the challenge.
- You have no doubt heard new talk of teams and committees, all part of the process of developing language and practices that support our evolving understanding of how best to organize ourselves.
- The Investment Review Committee is now called the Invested Funds Committee and has worked with the Board of Trustees on two policies that formalize our relationship and their role.
- The White Wing Board used to report to the Board of Trustees, but has been organizationally adrift for a few years. The Board of Trustees assumed responsibility this year, but after some

discernment, it became clear that it belongs in the operational side of the organization. Beginning next year, the school board will report to Allison as the Executive Director.

It is worth noting that all of this focus on governance, something you've heard my predecessors and I talk about for some time now, should be coming to an end soon. Governance is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end. If things proceed as planned, there will come a day in the near future when we no longer need to spend so much energy thinking and talking about governance. The whole purpose has been to lead ourselves to a point where we can focus on getting stuff done instead of talking about who's job it is or what we should do next.

Finally, I'd like to take a moment to express a very personal appreciation for my working relationship with Allison. I cannot imagine having a better partner to work with. If I polled President's across our denomination, I doubt many of them would consider themselves as blessed as I do. Not only do I believe that we all won the "ministerial lottery" when we said "yes" to Allison and she said "yes" to us, but I feel especially fortunate to be working with her.

## **WHITE WING**

I'd be remiss if I did not provide at least a brief update on White Wing, our beloved preschool. I'll provide a brief summary here, but I encourage you to make a point of reading the report by Hal Holway, the outgoing Chair of the White Wing School Board, for the full story.

I'll start with the good news and then move on to the great news. First, if you'll remember, there was some concern about WW's viability at this time last year. As a result, the congregation agreed to allow White Wing to forgo its annual \$23,000 contribution during this fiscal year. I am pleased to report that WW was not only able to pay all of that \$23,000, but it also ended the year in the black.

Second, as you have probably heard by now, White Wing is combining its program with another, well-regarded Nashua preschool, The Children's Winter Garden (CWG). The new school, cleverly named *Children's Winter Garden with White Wing School*, has already begun enrolling students for fall 2016. As someone involved in the process, I want you to know how thrilled we are with this turn of events.

White Wing is the second oldest preschool in town and CWG is the oldest. We are both NAEYC accredited and have very similar philosophies. The mission and philosophy statements of the two schools were virtually identical. Moreover, if you strike up a conversation about preschools in Nashua, one often hears the two schools mentioned in the same breath.

In a very practical sense, we were a great fit. We needed a director and some more students. Their lease was up and they needed a new home. We also offer a few more programs than they do, so their families will gain some additional options.

All in all, after a couple of uncertain years, we're excited to have found such a promising partner. Everyone on the WW board has worked especially hard over the past few years and I encourage you to thank them for their efforts.

In conclusion, I continue to be immensely proud of this organization and the people who bring it to life. I'd been on a few committees before I joined the board and thought I had a pretty good idea of all the work and energy that goes into making things run smoothly around here. It turns out I had no

idea. I have been deeply humbled on any number of occasions by the work you all do. Some of you arrive early and others stay late. Some of you help a little every week and others dedicate themselves to a single event and pour their heart and soul into it. Regardless of how or when it's done, the effort and the results are amazing.

I have said on numerous occasions over the past year that I feel like everything is coming together. Oh, we still have growing edges and more work to do, but I cannot shake the deep sense that we are about to do great things. Seeds planted long ago are beginning to bear fruit. I can't help but think we have a very bright future ahead of us. May it be so!

Respectfully submitted,

David Hudson