

President's Report

Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua

June 7, 2020

How much the earth has shifted under us in only a few short months. Our routines, our preconceptions of what is essential, what is safe and what is dangerous have all been upended. We find ourselves searching for understanding and for solace, for a way to make sense of the disruption, the chaos, and the fear. But within this searching, there has been discovery. We have discovered the power of our community and the power of our connection to hold us together as a congregation, to mourn and fret together, to seek solace and understanding, and to push ourselves to do the good we can, as our values and mission would have us.

Last year in my President's report, I noted the significant changes I had seen in our church since my previous report to the congregation as President back in 2000. I can honestly say the same thing this year, but these changes have occurred, not over the length of a 20-year span, but within a single year. We have adapted remarkably well to the demands, stresses, and challenges of moving our church life online. I would like to acknowledge the competence and dedication of the church staff—Rev. Allison Palm, Sherri Woolsey, Sadie Kahn-Greene, Jed Holland, and Ben Atherton-Zeman—in bringing Sunday worship online. The growth in depth and sophistication of our Sunday services over the course of this time of social distancing has been impressive. I would also like to thank lay leaders for their efforts to bring Sunday services into our homes: Frank and Kathy Grossman, and Dan Murphy for their invaluable assistance with music and the Wonder Box, as well as the Worship Associates and the entire Music Team, whose conscientious efforts were in evidence each Sunday.

I believe that during this pandemic, we have discovered remarkable strength and resilience within our congregation. These essential assets will doubtless help us weather the storm upon us, but they will also be central as we take on the work we have been preparing to do since we entered ministerial search—to become a church that makes a difference in the world. I believe it is imperative that we not lose focus on this aspirational vision of ourselves and of our church. We've worked so hard over the years to define it—who we want to be as a church community and the difference we want to make—it would be a tragedy to allow for this virus to claim our vision as its victim.

Among the materials prepared for you for this Annual Meeting is a summary of the recommendations made to your Board of Trustees by Mark Ewert, Stewardship and Financial Consultant, who spent a weekend with us in December 2019, back in normal times that now seem so long ago that I had to double check the date. Briefly summarizing his findings, Mark identified a range of strengths he saw within our church. They include: a strong ministry and professional staff that work well as a team; a flexible and adaptable congregation with

members who strongly care for each other and for those in the wider community; dedicated and capable lay leadership; consistent and wonderful worship, enhanced by an excellent music program; faith formation that has created multiple options for members of all ages; beautiful and well-maintained buildings that are right-sized for our congregation; and a congregation that has been more deliberate recently in making a solid investment in stewardship.

He also articulated that work we need to do, including clarifying the purposes of the endowment; clarifying the church's relationship with the Nashua Cemetery Association and with the preschool; building a stronger foundation for Stewardship, including a Planned Giving Program; launching a comprehensive review of the church's commitment to socially responsible investing; and assessing our readiness for a Capital Campaign. Mark Ewert's recommendations asks us to accomplish two things, to clarify and to build. To clarify that which we have allowed to remain ambiguous, and to strengthen the foundations which contribute to our financial health and sustainability.

The Board worked with Rev. Allison to establish a Building our Vision Team this year with the goal of developing a vision for our buildings and grounds—a vision that would honor their historical importance while equipping them to support our mission and ends as we move forward. The Team, consisting of Board members Rick Spitz, Lindsey Hedrick, and Lindsey Sylvester, with members at large Jon Lasselle, Kate O'Shea, Steve Pugh, Bob Sampson, and Frank Grossman, as well as Rev. Allison, held five conversations during January and February to listen to your thoughts on the opportunities and challenges our campus creates for us within our core ministries, such as worship, faith formation, music, social justice, and others. The Board and BoV Team met jointly at the end of March to craft a vision from the input received at those conversations. The BoV Team will be presenting that vision a bit later in this meeting. My thanks to all on the team for their excellent work. We are so lucky to have such committed and capable lay leaders.

Much work awaits us. I believe that if we can navigate these tasks by looking at them through the lens of our values, mission, and ends statements, we will emerge from this work a stronger church with a clear view of the path we want to walk in the coming years. Truly, doing this work is an opportunity for us to become the values-driven church that policy-based governance challenges us to be—a church that reflexively uses its values to make decisions about what we will do and how we will use our resources. Decisions driven by shared values, not by what is convenient, or expected, or what we've always done in the past. Expanding the family area within the pews is an example of making decisions consistent with our values. Creating this space was not without its challenges, both in terms of its implementation and its impact. But it's only by embracing our core values and having them drive our decisions that we can become a church that will be an agent of change. In this broken world, is that not the ultimate accomplishment for any church?

Your Board of Trustees places such importance on this value-driven work that we will be measuring our progress towards it over the next four years. This year, we have collected baseline data to tell us where you believe we are starting in our journey to accomplish our eight Ends. Thank you to all of you who have responded to this survey, as your input will define this starting point, and your responses in the coming years will measure our progress.

This report wouldn't be complete without an acknowledgement of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on our church. The Board of Trustees had a goal this year of embracing radical hospitality—for each of us on the Board to move out of our comfort zones, our comfortable circle of friends, and to reach out to visitors, new members, and anyone who simply looked as though a bit of human connection was needed. At Board meetings, we shared experiences and encouraged each other. We had become more attentive, more willing to take risks connecting with others unknown to us, and then suddenly the ground beneath us shifted in the form of required social distancing. Given the number of months we have been meeting online and the number of months still to come, we need to remain keenly aware of the challenges of maintaining connection with each other, for it is our connections to each other that bind us into a sacred church community. Maintaining and strengthening these ties will be crucial in the year ahead. Let us pledge to each do our part.

I do want to thank you all for the privilege of serving as your President during the past two years. It has been a time of challenge and of growth for me, a time to be able to truly appreciate the depth of talent that exists in this community, both within the lay leadership and the professional staff. I know I leave the Board in capable hands, but before I do, I want to thank them all for their incredible support and hard work during those years, especially our officers, Brenna Woods, Vice President; Lindsey Hedrick, Treasurer; and Jodie Holway, Clerk. I would also like to extend a special thanks to Rick Spitz, who will be leaving the Board after having served so capably the full maximum of three terms on the Board, for a total of six years. Thank you all.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol R. Houde
President,
Unitarian Universalist Church of Nashua