

Minister's Report 2022-2023

UU Church of Nashua, NH - Rev. Allison Palm

This year marks the end of eight years of shared ministry together. I come to the end of this year filled with inspiration, hope and gratitude. In many ways, this has been a year of rebuilding, our first full year back mostly in person after two years that were mostly virtual. As with previous pandemic years, we have continued to reinvent how we do things, and I think we will continue on the path over the next few years. This is a time when much of how organized religion has been done in the past is in flux, when people have gotten out of the habit of church or never were in that habit, and yet, I feel even more convinced that our ministry matters, that our community of love and belonging is badly needed in this world of division and isolation.

Just this week I attended a call with other UU ministers about current trends in parish ministry. The picture painted was a little bleak – reports of declines in attendance, giving and volunteering are commonplace these days. We are all struggling to rebuild our communities and our lives after three years of major disruptions from the pandemic, and from the continued political tumult. But the report was not without hope. Across the country, congregations are reporting increased innovation, spiritual deepening, and a renewed sense of purpose in the midst of all those challenges.

We have seen those things here at UU Nashua, and in many ways, I feel like we have been an exception to some of the more negative downward trends. After two really difficult pandemic years, I can feel the energy and enthusiasm coming back to this community. We welcomed more new members this year than we have since 2015, and ran an ambitious and successful capital campaign this year. We have a thriving faith formation program, music that receives high praise from every guest preacher we've ever had, a deep connection to justice work in our community, and vibrant worship services every single week. We have done such good ministry together this year, living into our mission as a welcoming community of faith, inspiring lives of wonder, generosity and courage, serving the world through love in action.

We did a lot together this year and this report will not try to summarize everything. Instead, I will offer some general highlights, some of the specific things we did to further our ends this year, a glimpse at the work ahead, and some words of gratitude.

Highlights of the Year: General

The first half of this church year was shaped by two big things: my sabbatical and the lead up to our November Congregational Meeting about proposed changes to our building.

I was so grateful for the opportunity to take a **5 month sabbatical** from July 1-November 30, 2020. During that time, I focused on two big projects.

One was continued work on editing a volume of Unitarian Universalist rituals. This is a project I have been engaged in since late 2020, and am working on with a co-editor, Rev. Heather Concannon. The book will include more than 70 rituals, contributed by more than 50 UUs from across the continent. During my sabbatical, we completed a second draft of the entire manuscript, and turned it in to our publisher (Skinner House). We anticipate that the book will be published in Spring 2024.

The second was a goal of walking every block in Nashua. I engaged in this project in hopes of grounding myself more deeply in this city where I live and serve. While I did not finish during my sabbatical, I made really good progress on this, walking 211 miles over the course of 63 walks. I estimate that this is about 60% of the city. I am continuing to walk (though in much shorter spurts), and hope that I might finish the rest up in the coming months.

In addition to these two projects, I tried to take time for rest and renewal, and nurtured connections to the larger UU world, including attending the AUUMM Conference in July. I was so grateful for this time away from my regular responsibilities, and I know that I returned with more mental energy and a renewed excitement for our ministry together.

The church staff and lay leaders ably covered for me while I was away, kicking off our first in-person fall since 2019. Caro Barschow, our Ministerial Intern, moved into the role of half-time Sabbatical Minister during those months, and worked with Director of Faith Formation Sadie Kahn-Greene and Church Administrator Ericka LaValley to serve as a three person Executive Team. They were supported by Sabbatical co-chairs David Hudson and Carol Houde.

While I was on sabbatical, the Building Our Vision Team and the Board of Trustees were hard at work preparing for a **November Congregational Meeting to vote on plans for our building**. Over the summer and into the fall, the BOV Team led five task forces who worked with our architects to create plans to make our building align better with our mission, and the needs of a 21st century church. They engaged the congregation in reviewing these plans through conversations and surveys, and prioritized our needs and desires into three possible plans. The congregation voted 89% to pursue the Visionary Plan.

The next month, just as I returned from sabbatical, we engaged in a Financial Feasibility Study to determine what the giving potential might be in our congregation. The results of that study were very positive, and led to the focus of the second half of this church year, the preparation for and running of our **first major Capital Campaign in living memory**. After more conversation and feedback, another congregational vote was held in early March to launch a \$2.2 million campaign. The combined Investing in our Vision Capital Campaign and Annual Pledge Drive began April 16 and concluded May 14. The campaign was led by co-chairs Jess Woods and Karen Murray, along with a 17 member Capital Campaign Team, who organized and supported 20 Visiting Stewards. This fantastic team produced beautiful, informative materials, put on three major events, made over 60 visits to members of the congregation, along with countless phone calls, emails and texts. The hard work paid off. We exceeded our Capital Campaign goal, with 130 commitments totaling \$2,303,881.87, and made our pledge goal, with 190 pledges totaling \$375,139.00. This is a phenomenal result and I am so grateful to everyone who made it happen with their gifts of time, talent and money.

Highlights by Ends Statement

For each of our Ends, I wanted to share just a couple of the things we've been up to this year. There is a lot that is not included here, but much of that can be found in other reports. The Ends statements are in italics.

We create brave space for all ages where we:

- *Know our authentic Unitarian Universalist faith identity, teach it to our children, share it with others, and live it in the world.*

Our children's Faith Formation programs returned to fully in person this year, with **workshops and children's chapel** for kids ages 4-10, a **Crossing Paths** curriculum focused on learning about the faiths of our neighbors for our middle schoolers, and a robust **Coming of Age** program for our older youth, where they were encouraged to explore and express their own beliefs and UU identity.

Our winter Leadership Summit invited people to create their own **UU elevator speeches**. Each of the 25 people who attended considered how they might, in just a few sentences, describe UUism to a stranger.

This spring, we had 8 UU Nashua members take an **online UU Theology** class through Faith Forward, a program out of the Dallas UU Church.

- *Develop meaningful spiritual practices that connect us to wonder.*

We have continued to hold **high quality multiplatform services nearly every Sunday**, with the exception of two in-person only services on holiday weekends. We also held 2 Christmas Eve services and an evening Winter Solstice Service.

Our **choir** transitioned back to singing in person nearly every week this year, and have been sounding great!

We **explored various spiritual practices** in our poetry group, covenant groups, spiritual practices classes, and in worship.

- *Ask for and receive care, support, and connection in times of struggle, joy, and transition.*

Our Pastoral Care Associates **led a Sunday service in March** about asking for help, sharing from their own experience about what gets in the way, and the positive impact of being vulnerable and asking for help when you need it.

I began a new drop-in **Caring Circle** program, inviting a different group to come each month for mutual support and sharing. The topics ranged from caring for loved ones to living with chronic illness to parenting at various stages.

- *Grow leaders who serve the needs of our congregation and our community with faith, resilience, and courage.*

We **engaged more than 35 people in leading our Capital Campaign** this spring, making it possible to run a super successful campaign in a very short period of time.

After a couple year hiatus, we reintroduced twice yearly **Leadership Summits** to our calendar. This year's Summits were focused on UU identity and anti-oppression work.

- *Steward our congregational community with our time, talent, and money.*

We ran a very success **Investing in our Vision Combined Campaign**, which resulted in both generous financial giving and a deepened understanding of stewardship among the leaders of the campaign and those who participated.

We have been working intentionally to **integrate newcomers in stewarding the congregation with their time and talents**, engaging in conversations about gifts and interests, and matching folks up to the appropriate opportunities to serve. We hope to do even more of this next year with both new and long term members of our community.

- *Participate actively in our larger Unitarian Universalist community.*

Twelve people attended **General Assembly** last year, some virtual and some in person and we have 8 attending either virtually or in person this year, including a full slate of delegates.

Sadie worked with the New England Region to host an Elementary Our Whole Lives Training for UUs across New England this spring. As a result, we were able to get five folks from our congregation trained and offer 5th and 6th grad OWL for the first time this spring.

- *Understand systems of oppression and privilege and work to dismantle them within ourselves, our congregation, our community, and the larger world.*

Our **Fall Leadership Summit** was focused on **anti-racism**, in response to the goal of leadership training in anti-racism that was identified by our Widening the Circle Study Group the previous year. We hope to do something similar and reach more people in future years.

Our new Renewal of Welcoming Team worked to **renew our Welcoming Congregation status** for the first time this year, including holding a **Community Name/Pronoun Affirmation Ceremony** in the fall.

- *Work in deep partnership to advance justice and heal our community and our world.*

Members of our congregation have been deeply involved in the Granite State Organizing Project's **organizing against a proposed Asphalt Plant** in downtown Nashua.

We have been forming a relationship with **603 Equality**, the new LGBTQ+ statewide advocacy organization in NH. Caro and the Renewal of Welcoming Team helped to host their first Nashua Hub Meeting in our building, and Caro has been helping organize subsequent meetings. I hope we can deepen that relationship in the coming years.

We have continued our relationship with Grow Nashua, serving a s site for a **Lil' Free Farmstand** both last summer and this summer. This summer we are excited to have the group that has been stewarding that stand lead a summer worship service.

What's Next

Our big project next year will be beginning to **implement the Building Our Vision plans** for our church building. We are already starting to meet with our architects to take the next steps and will be reaching out for more help in the coming weeks to create more detailed plans. Our goal is to begin construction in Spring 2024.

We will be saying goodbye to our Ministerial Intern, Caro Barschow at the end of June. It has been such a joy to work with them, and we are excited for her to take the next step in her ministry! We are in talks with another intern for next year, and hope to announce that soon.

And, of course, we will keep on seeking to further our mission and ends, offering a place of wonder and welcome and a voice for justice in Nashua in the coming year.

Gratitude

Of course, I cannot end my report without some gratitude. I want to offer a huge thank you to our staff, who give so much time and dedication: Caro Barschow, Lori Bonnette, Mark Connolly, Jed Holland, Sadie Kahn-Greene, and Ericka LaValley. They consistently go above and beyond, pouring their hearts into this work and this community, and I am filled with gratitude for our shared ministry.

Our Board of Trustees has also offered phenomenal leadership this past year, digging deep to have important conversations and make thoughtful decisions about the future of our congregation. I especially want to shout out our outgoing Board President, Brenna Woods, who has served so ably the last three years through three staff leave times, a record number of congregational meetings, and countless Covid policy revisions. Thank you to Brenna for their steady leadership in this time of big change.

And finally, a big thank you to all of you who make this congregation continue with your time, talents and money. We exist and are able to further our mission both inside and outside these walls because of you. Thank you. You are a really amazing group of individuals and a beautiful community, and I am so grateful for the ways you care for one another and for our world.

I look forward to our continued shared ministry in the coming year!

In faith,
Rev. Allison Palm