



First Unitarian Church
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Minister's Report to the Congregation

May 17, 2020

In some ways, last August seems like a very long time ago. In these nine-and-a-half months, your congregation has changed, and the world has changed.

You had previously spent eight months as a lay-led congregation, and you developed confidence and capability to do many things for yourselves and to minister to each other. You also came to appreciate and to be hopeful about what a professional minister can do for you.

We have built on that groundwork. This is the process of change that we are engaged in together, as expressed in a sermon in September:

Change can be unsettling, difficult, and risky. Change can also lead to new ways that may be more authentic to who we are and who we want to be. Change can open us to new opportunities. To change one thing changes everything. Isn't this the way the universe works? Chaos theory tells us that a small change makes a big difference. You can't change one thing without affecting everything else.

Some things have changed and continue to change around here.... You're in between what was and what will be; you're in transition. Rev. David is gone; after eight months as a lay-led congregation you now have a minister again. Rev. Connie is here, for now. I'm pre-fired. After two years of transitional ministry, I'll be leaving, and you'll call a new settled minister.

Some years back interim ministers were expected to "shake things up" by changing things for the sake of change. But just by being here, I've changed things already, and the philosophy of interim ministry has shifted to a gentler understanding of the interim minister's role. We're all works in progress, and we learn to relate to each other and to work together as minister and congregation.

Your Board of Trustees, teams, committees, and councils have identified some ways that they want help revising how some things are done. The volunteers who have kept your church functioning so well over these past eight months are appropriately proud of the work they have done. And some of those volunteers are ready to turn some of that work back over to your minister and staff. Yet the role of volunteers is important and ongoing. It's your church. Ministers come and go.

My job is not to change things for the sake of change. My job is not to change things, or to change you. My job, as your interim minister, is to help you do what you want to do and be who you are, at your best, and to help you envision what your “best” looks like.

How will you respect and learn from the heritage that helps shape you?

How will you carry forward those aspects that are useful and meaningful?

How will you change the things that you want to change?

Will you be resistant to transition, or open to transformation?

After all, you can't change one thing.

Some highlights of our transitional work together:

Timeline of perspectives on congregational history

The overwhelming theme of the notes that congregants placed on the timeline of perspectives on congregational history in November was appreciation. Appreciation for people: for your ministers, for fellow congregants, for programs and events, and for the church itself. Appreciation for words and acts of kindness that made all the difference in someone's life.

Yet some of the notes expressed regrets, frustrations, and questions. There were regrets about people and programs whose time had come and gone in the natural course of events. There were bittersweet memories of beloved people and of meaningful programs that are no more.

There were regrets about what might have been, particularly in the areas of racial justice initiatives. It was mentioned that in the 1960s, a number of African Americans joined the church as a consequence of the civil rights movement and the church's activities in that movement. Those members stayed for years until they passed away, but there has never been a large influx of people of color into the congregation.

There were regrets, frustrations, and unanswered questions about the departures of ministers and other personnel. And, of course, many of those questions can never be fully answered for reasons of individuals' privacy. Personnel matters are often complicated by personal and interpersonal issues, even when there is an explanation given publicly for the departure. This emphasis on privacy may seem like the enemy of transparency, but in personnel matters the superficial reasons are often not the only reasons. As we Unitarian Universalists know, often there is more than one truth in any given situation, not simply “the truth.” As in theological matters, respecting each other's truths is essential to our ongoing relationships and conversations with each other.

“Getting to the Heart of the Matter”

At the beginning of March, your Transition Team and VIM Team co-sponsored a gathering we called “Getting to the Heart of the Matter (in six words more-or-less): A Congregational Experience.” The objectives of this congregational gathering were two-fold:

- To offer an opportunity for congregants to articulate and share their thoughts and feelings (in six words more-or-less) about what this congregation is and can be, for themselves, for each other, and for the larger community

- To generate a congregational covenant that can become part of Sunday morning liturgy, expressing the foundational and aspirational identity of the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh.

The final steps in crafting the congregational covenant were set aside when in-person worship was suspended a couple of weeks after the workshop, but we'll soon offer opportunities for you to try out a covenantal statement with the potential of endorsing it as a congregation in the fall.

Adapting to a changing world

Since March 22, worship services have been live-streamed from the sanctuary via YouTube. According to YouTube analytics, "peak concurrent views" average 134 for these seven Sundays, and we now have 111 subscribers to the First Unitarian Pittsburgh YouTube channel. The pews aren't really empty, because you are there. Creating these services is the work of your dedicated program staff, including Erica Shadowsong, Director of Lifespan Religious Education; Ellen Gozion, Instrumental Music Director; and Kris Rust, Vocal Music Director. Volunteer musicians Maddy Izzo, Brian Junker, Hugh McGough, and Al, Rob, and Charlie Schwartz have also contributed their talents, as have Mary Pat Mengato and Commissioned Lay Minister Stephanie Pawlowski. Tech crew volunteers Paul Cunningham, Joe Jencik, Brian Junker, Will Snavely, and Emily Sweeny devote many hours to ensure high-quality production.

Your administrative staff members have also stepped up to do what needs to be done, as they always do. Rita Gates, Business Manager; Cicely Moultrie, Communications Coordinator; and Dan Laity, Sexton have been working from home when possible and coming in to the office when necessary, to keep the building safe and to support the work of the congregation.

Looking forward

You will soon endorse your Ministerial Search Committee, and they will begin the work of searching for your next settled minister in earnest. I will support them and you in this process. They will be working toward presenting a candidate to you for your vote a year from now, with the potential for that minister to begin work with you in August 2021.

And in the meantime, we'll continue to gather for Sunday morning worship services using technology until such time that it's safe to gather in person. I'm available to you for pastoral care and other concerns, even if we can't meet face-to-face. We'll continue learning new ways.

- *Rev. Connie Grant*, Interim Minister