

**Report from Rev. Alexandra McGee, Assistant Minister
for July 12, 2020 congregational meeting of TJMC UU**

Dear Members and Friends of the Congregation:

There are multiple purposes for this report. One is to have a note in the history books of this church. Toward that end, I would tell the future generations that this was a year of regrouping after the departure of a minister, and mid-year, during the pandemic and building closure.

Another purpose of an annual report is to let friends, newcomers, donors, know how we are doing. I would tell them this congregation is courageous, thriving, values-based, and creative. A third purpose of this annual report is to have a moment of pause for a ministerial leader to reflect to members on the activities and well-being of the congregation.

I encourage readers to look at this report in tandem with the report of the President, which gives a timeline of events in the congregation and decisions by the board.

As of July 1 last year, the staffing of this congregation was: an empty position for Lead Minister; a half time administrative assistant position filled by Wendy Steeves, who left in early fall, and Caroline Heins has moved into that role, pairing it with her half time work as RE Assistant; the Director of Admin and Finance role was filled by Christina Rivera, who generously stayed extra months while the search committee did a second search for candidates and she trained the new director, Sean Skally. Scott DeVeaux remained steady as Music Director. Leia Durland-Jones, in her role as Director of Faith Development, did what she has done so many times over 25 years with this congregation: she stretched, filled gaps, stood up powerfully and gracefully to serve those in need, looked skillfully at what the congregation needed to be healthy, and did what she could beyond her defined role. My role changed last July 1 to to handle all worship planning and to also attend board meetings, as well as continuing pastoral care.

At the start of the church year in summer 2019, in the absence of a Lead Minister, Leia, Lorie and I sat down at the start of the church year and drew up a vision of what was essential to accomplish, what extras we could do, or not, and who and how we would do them. I knew that trust in the congregation was low and that wounds were fresh. My main goal was deliver the basic spiritual services that would keep this faith community woven together, allowing time and space for wounds to heal, trusting that we have hard-working lay leaders and that there are certain services ministry staff are trained to provide. Given the staff resources, we did not plan for a young adult program; did not plan for staff to attend local social justice planning teams, but instead lay leaders attended; for Membership team, Leia met with them once and I met by phone and email; for Active Minds, I met once; for Covenant Groups, they did not have much staff support but they stayed steady; the Social Justice Council kept in touch with staff by email and phone and pulled off amazing events and community outreach; and I met with the COM twice. I began attending board meetings. In order to do more with less, and because we still had not budgeted for paper orders of worship, we sang the same hymns all month each month, created a team of lay leaders to run the projector and sound board. Retired ministers helped with funerals that I was not available to do. We achieved the goal of simple, regular services, so that people had something to hold on to.

Then, in March 2019, when the church building closed due to the pandemic, the staff made a fast pivot to do activities on zoom. We built new teams with new skills, such as the Medical Advisory team, the online Tech team, the Phone Tree.

Some gifts arose from coping with all these challenges.

In the change to the pandemic, we began letters twice a week to the congregation with news, inspiration, and stories. This is a tool we had already begun to consider, and I believe is very helpful and I hope we will continue.

Another gift this year as we coped with change, was filling the pulpit with visiting ministers. At the start of the year, I strategized to have local interfaith leaders come so that we could know our neighboring faiths. Leia led special ritual services. In the winter, I shifted to invited UU leaders so you as a congregation could see the diverse range of UU leaders, what they look and feel like, and the many special programs of the UUA.

The church seemed to have a resiliency of vitality in the fall and winter: soup Sundays, potlucks, and many special celebrations led by many different people. Many people commented on a fresh, relaxed energy in the building on Sunday mornings.

I hope you will find ways to express thank yous to many lay leaders:

Board showed leadership through change, with vision, faith, patience:

You have a board that is steady, patient, compassionate, hard-working, and devoted. In difficult decisions this year, they showed faith, commitment, and collaboration. All of them also work in other areas of church life, and bring a variety of perspectives.

Admin Council: Finance committee, Glenn Short, pledge drive, and more...

The Glenn Short Trust is an unusual moment in this congregation's history, a generosity that I hope will be emulated often, and a thorough devotion to improving the physical plant.

Community Life Council: Membership, UU Guys, many groups....

Social Justice Council: food pantry, Social Action collection, PACEM, Clergy collective, many steady hard-working values-based efforts

Ministries: Worship Weavers, Carenet, Pastoral Visitors, funerals, weddings

You can find reports from each committee about what they did on the website. There are statistics about numbers of people involved, numbers of people served, and money raised and money spent.

When I look at the **mission** statement of this congregation, I do indeed believe that the past year demonstrates actions that lived up to that mission. We read the mission at the start of worship many Sundays this past year, and it is on many of our mailings, and on the website.

When I look at this congregation's **covenant**, and look at the past year, I see that the congregation kept covenant by embracing one another spiritually and emotionally, promoting social justice within the congregation and larger community, and generously supporting the ministries of the church with time, money, and enthusiasm.

Other parts of the covenant, I believe, are areas where this congregation is still building its skills, and I hope you will ask the interim minister, Linda, to help you with these parts: communicating with compassion and respect, especially when you disagree; celebrating diversity and nurturing inclusivity; lovingly calling each other back into covenant.

If I were to write a **spiritual biography** for this congregation in the past year, I think of a school of fish. Sometimes they swim as a pack. Sometimes different fish come to the lead. Sometimes fish swim away from the group because of hurt, confusion, unmet expectations. Sometimes fish are separated from the school because of changes in technology and communication.

Spiritual words I would use to describe this year:

This church has experienced desolation – wondering where its soul is; and that is starting to move toward consolation.

This church has experienced being in the desert – and has differing ideas about how to journey out of the desert.

This church has experienced many, many wellsprings of hope, and finds nourishing waters in each others cups, in each many winds of the holy spirit, and is connected to a great fire for justice.

Pearl pictures: a few images that embody the spirit moving:

-Youth raised in the congregation, Hayley Owens, Julia Landis, Ellie Ransom stepped into worship leadership.

-Long time leaders, Sally Taylor retiring from membership chair, Ann Salamini retiring from secretary role, Johanna Woodchild retiring from Social Justice Council Chair, each celebrating a chapter of service, and trusting the next generation to lead onward while they rest a while.

-UU guys meets monthly, giving a place of solace and community and growth for men as they navigate lifes ups and downs, and still find a way to connect on line after the pandemic.

-Active Minds meets weekly, so that elders have a place for intellectual reflection and social connection, and when the pandemic came, they created a phone tree so that there are still weekly phone calls to check on people.

-The middle-school youth met all year, building rapport and reflecting with mentors on their faith journeys, and then when the pandemic hit, they easily switched to zoom and created a worship service which they gave in May, and they continue to connect weekly.

-Other local faith leaders that were eager to be good neighbors to us and come be with us on Sunday mornings, even when it meant stretching themselves.

Losses

ASP – this annual service trip by the teens did not happen due to virus

Bridging in person did not happen due to virus

New member ceremony postponed due to virus

Deaths of congregation members

Opportunities

-Ongoing listening to how different people experienced rifts and harm, lost hopes leading up to the departure of Erik Wikstrom and Christina Rivera

-Examining accessibility: how do we unwittingly exclude access to our building, our worship, our governance systems

- The endowment put to work with the national UUA endowment to support equity
- Membership – what new systems will integrate people?
- Small group ministry especially since we can't gather in large groups
- Being in a building differently – how to do so in covenant?
- Email newsletters – how can they connect and nourish, and how can we reach others?
- Feehie – how to nourish our children and let them know they are loved by a community

Here are my prayers for this church:

In the coming year, I believe this congregation has an opportunity to learn what it means to trust a minister and trust each other. To understand roles, boundaries and mutual accountability. A spiritual question for this congregation: what do you need to grieve, forgive, and repair about your past, even as you move forward into an interim ministry and in the new parameters of a pandemic?

This congregation, despite having some tight budgets in recent years, has access to incredible wealth, and can put that wealth toward its values of justice and equity. What does it mean to be a people of faith with these resources? This congregation is located in a town where people flock to live here: how can you meet the spiritual needs of those people, and receive and include their spiritual gifts?

Three weeks from now, the new interim minister, Linda Olsen Peebles, will join me, Leia, Sean, Caroline and Scott in serving you. We look forward to extraordinary possibilities.

In peace,
Alex McGee
Assistant Minister