

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

**“Reflecting Back, Planning Forward”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 5, 2020

**Readings**

From the [notes from Rev. Trumbore’s Startup Weekend](#) here in the fall of 1999

**WHAT BRINGS AND KEEPS ME HERE?**

**Community→**

- "I come for the people."
- Friendly environment/atmosphere
- Fellowship
- Welcoming to newcomers
- Inspiring friends
- Social activities - fun and other
- Committee work
- A feeling of energy within the community
- Potential for nurturing creativity
- Feels like home spiritually and emotionally
- A sense of love/caring/affection for each other
- It's a safe place.
- It's a diverse place.
- Coffee hour
- Civility
- Supportive place through all stages of life

**Shared beliefs and values→**

- UU philosophy
- Shared search for truth and meaning
- Shared liberal religious values
- Freedom of expression
- Freedom of worship
- Shared respect for people's individual searches
- Non-creedal congregation

**Individual/Spiritual Growth→**

- The need to manifest religious experience
- Spiritual connection with one another
- Self reflection
- Spiritual renewal and nurturing

**Intellectual exploration/stimulation→**

- Critical thinking about today's issues
- Opportunities for diverse thinking
- Intellectual challenges

**Social values→**

- Opportunities for social action
- Volunteer opportunities
- Connection to the greater community
- Tolerance and acceptance extending to the greater community

**Children/R.E.→**

- The quality of the R.E. Program
- The opportunity to teach in the R. E. Program
- Children see people they can emulate.
- Safe place physically and emotionally for kids
- Children can grow spiritually while parental values are affirmed.

**Sunday Services→**

- Time set aside from weekly routine
- Time for centering/slowing down

**Family/Intergenerational Life→**

- Family togetherness

**MY GREATEST HOPE FOR THE CONGRATION →IS...**

- Positive diversity: Tolerance, listening and intergenerational interaction
- Shared goals and their achievement
- Positive orientation or outlook
- Joyful, personally relevant search for meaning
- Foster community that is trusting, caring, harmonious, safe, active and challenging
- Political/social action including collaboration with other congregations
- Growth - unbridled or cautionary
- Openness to new people and new ideas
- Upgrade/expand facility
- Become financially stronger
- Be better known -- more influential in community
- Have a younger membership
- Promote a truly shared ministry
- Become a resource to the community - e.g., an urban community center

From the beginning of our 2009 Strategic Plan:

In May, 2008, the Board of Trustees appointed a strategic planning committee to help [our congregation] explore the dreams and possibilities of what our congregation could be and to make recommendations for our future. Once convened, our committee selected Dream Catchers as our name. According to Native American tradition, a dream catcher will filter your dreams, allowing only good dreams to pass through. We sought to engage as many members of our congregation as possible in the planning process...

Our congregation talked about our dreams in numerous meetings and gatherings over a period of nine months. We shared laughter and tears, recalling times that demonstrated how important our religious community has been in our lives. We described our longing for stronger connections, deeper meaning and greater impact. We compared our personal philosophies as free thinkers who find common ground in the principles and values of Unitarian Universalism. Loving what we have, we seek more. Together, we believe we can make more of a difference in the lives of our members, our congregation, and our larger community.

Our plan identifies goals and objectives that are focused in four areas:

- Community and connection
- Theological and philosophical diversity
- Social justice
- Beacon of liberal religion

In addition, we recommend that the Board of Trustees consider changes in our organizational structure, staffing and governance which can help us to achieve these goals and objectives.

## **Sermon**

I got an email this week from Bob Franklin. He asked me what the exact date was when the congregation voted to call me as your minister.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with how full-time ministers are selected for UU congregations, it is an elaborate, expensive and time-consuming process. Ministers who express interest in a congregation searching for a minister, and, congregations in search who are interested in a minister in search, exchange detailed information about themselves and what they are looking for. In 1998, Albany UU sent me a notebook of materials full of information, pictures, brochures, tables, surveys and statistics. I sent one back with a picture, a bio, a standardized record sheet, resume, writings, sermons, a theological statement, and other relevant materials I thought a congregation might want to know about me.

If we think there is a potential match between us, the minister comes for a weekend to visit the congregation's location and preach in a nearby pulpit, called a "neutral pulpit." Only the congregation's search committee is supposed to attend and interact with the pre-candidate. (I pre-

candidated in Schenectady in 1998 so some non-search committee members did show up to check me out) Congregations are advised to precandidate 3 to 4 people. Then the search committee decides who they will invite to come back again as the candidate. If the minister accepts the invitation and contractual terms can be agreed upon, the minister will return for a week this time. The minister preaches the first Sunday then meets members, attends socials, events and meetings to give the candidate lots of exposure and chances to talk with many people. On the next Sunday, the minister offers another service and is excused. A membership meeting of the congregation ensues. The candidate is discussed then voted on. If there isn't an overwhelming yes vote, the minister shouldn't accept the call to that congregation. In my case it was over 97%. I agreed to be your minister at the end of January 1999 starting in August of that year. It was an exciting day, one of the highpoints of my life, ... but I didn't remember the exact date.

And that question coming from Bob was a little worrisome. Bob is our current master of the Annual Dinner Skit. Leaders in the congregation and the minister often get gently satirized in the skit or the songs. I know he'll be up to something during the celebration of my 20 years of ministry here that we will be holding after the service today. (Just for comparison, I've served here longer than any other minister since 1842. The longest serving before me was Nick Cardell serving for 12 years.) If you didn't sign up, I expect we'll be able to find a way to fit you in, just go to the back of the food line.

So off I went digging around in my extensive digital files then into an old file cabinet in the basement with drawers packed with paper files. In the process I came upon the records of my startup weekend here.

Standard protocol for the beginning of a ministry in a congregation is something called a startup weekend. It is usually a Friday night, Saturday affair run by a staff member from the Unitarian Universalist Association to help the congregation and minister get off to a good start.

Before arriving here in Albany, I served a small UU congregation in Port Charlotte, Florida. When I announced I'd be leaving, they were happy for my opportunity to come to Albany but distressed about being able to call another minister as they were running out of money (a key reason I decided I needed to enter the search process). A couple who were attending at that time, Joe and Ann Batal, approached me about working with the congregation to do some visioning work – to which I enthusiastically agreed. That work was so successful, they raised enough money to call an interim minister and begin the search process for my replacement.

So, knowing I would be have this start-up weekend here, I called Joe and Ann and asked if they would come to Albany to help me get started here.

FUUSA, as we called ourselves back then, had been through some rough times. Our last settled minister, the Rev. Joan Kahn-Schneider, who died a year or two ago, had been in serious conflict with the congregation that ended with her negotiated resignation. In the last three years, three different interim ministers had served the congregation. The first, Josiah Bartlett, former President of Starr King School for the Ministry, was one of the finest interim ministers the UUA had at the

time. Unfortunately he died after his first year here. Also during that time, some of the disaffected members formed a congregation that started meeting in Rensselaer. I wanted to have a startup weekend that would get my ministry off to a good start and bring people together. Joe and Ann enthusiastically agreed to help.

That October startup weekend in 1999 was an energizing experience for me and for the congregation. We had a great turnout of about 90 people. As I read through the report generated by the Batala that you heard a little of earlier, I could recognize chronic issues congregations struggle with on a regular basis and an excitement to return to an old problem. Ever since we expanded the building in 1962 to build RE classrooms and office space, members hadn't been satisfied. We just didn't have a large enough social hall or sanctuary for large events and services. The congregation had been contemplating building renovation and expansion before the troubles. Now they were ready to take up the work again.

Without going into all the details, the building expansion effort began again with that start up weekend. Eight years later, we were dedicating the new space. Another high point of my life was seeing our congregation accomplish this goal. And what was crystal clear to me was it didn't come from me. The vision for the expansion grew out of the membership of this congregation. It was a beautiful process to be part of, help guide and witness.

I take full credit for supporting the work of the congregation ... and not screwing it up.

After six months of moving in and getting comfortable in our new space, our congregation was ready to do visioning work again. We remembered part of our building funding, a discounted mortgage rate, came with an obligation for serving the community. You heard in the reading from the Strategic Plan some of the work that started in 2008 that concluded with our strategic plan in June of 2009.

It is valuable for us to return to that work again, over ten years later, to assess how much we've done to actualize that plan. Board of Trustees member Nancy Shay wrote a Board column for Windows last June that described how much we'd accomplished working on that plan. You can still find that report on our web site if you'd like to have a look. Here are a few highlights of ways we have fulfilled our strategic plan:

- The Adoption of Sheridan Preparatory Academy as our neighborhood public school and fundraising and organizing to build Sheridan Prep playground
- The initiation of the Wellspring and Meaning Matters programs
- The Congregational Covenant Team
- The Community and Connection Committee
- The Green Sanctuary Committee
- The Inclusivity Team
- The Resettlement of an Iraqi family
- Our Fracking & Sanctuary Congregational Resolutions

- The Growth Through Service Program
- Friday Night Multi-generational Potlucks
- The Pastoral Care Associates Program
- The Hudson Mohawk UU Cluster & joint service every year
- Thandeka's year of consulting on worship and inclusion
- Three ministerial interns
- A Major web site redesign
- An Active involvement in social media promotion
- Electronic Windows
- Governance Task Force

This isn't everything that we've done in that last ten years, but it gives you a sense that a lot is moving and happening here. It may not *feel* as though we've been doing this much connected to that strategic plan because things happen at the speed of church. It takes us a long time to get things done because we're working with the membership's spare time, energy and money to get things going. We must pause and step back to see all the initiatives and progress we've made. And some of these efforts are work in progress. We still haven't got that Covenant done, though we have a lovely draft for us to consider.

It is this slow and at times erratic pace of progress that is behind the Governance changes the Governance Task Force initiated. Our goal is to reshape our governance into two parts, governance and ministry. Governance does the institutional visioning and oversight work while the ministry side translates the vision into programs, initiatives and action. By creating two centers of activity rather than one, the Board will have more ability to look ahead and guide the congregation through the waters ahead while the ministry side sails the boat and keeps the crew productively engaged. Both need to work closely together of course to keep the congregation moving forward and away from storms, rough water and rocks.

On the ministry side, the Board created a team called the Ministry and Operations Team, formerly the Program Team, to sail the boat. Fortunately, our Board is pretty good at staying out of day to day operations of our congregation, mostly leaving that work to the staff, the minister and relevant committees. What the Board is less sure of is how to do the visioning side of the work. We know how we did the first Strategic Plan which was a big, nine-month project that consumed a great deal of energy. How does the Board do that on a month to month basis?

The secret here is that the Board cannot do this work by itself. Its job is to organize data collection from the congregation and to assess the will of the membership. We are not a top down organization where the Board President or the minister comes up with a vision and sells it to the congregation. When we've been most successful, the will of the people has bubbled up from the roots of our congregation and guided us forward. That's how our building expansion happened. That's the source of our strategic plan in 2009.

And that is the work we are renewing now as the Board invites the congregation to get involved in the World Café after the service next Sunday.

I know we've got burning issues on our minds that we want to find ways to address as a congregation. Accelerating climate change is causing many of us great distress. We have an election coming up in November that will profoundly affect this issue. The decline of housing in West Hill, Arbor Hill and the South End is an ongoing source of distress that is in our backyard, right across West Street. The inhumane treatment of refugees at our border continues to distress us. Preparing disadvantaged children for success at Sheridan Prep gives us hope yet increases our larger social concerns. Death with dignity continues to be a right many of us want. We continue to explore how to be a good neighbor. These are some of the issues that have been on our minds and continue to occupy our attention. And there are other shared concerns in this room that haven't been spoken here before.

And there are internal congregational needs and desires that need attention too. How do we want to present religious services in the future? Do we want to increase the use of a visual element in Sunday services by adding a projection system to Community Hall? Do we want to stream our services to our members at places like Beverwyk so they feel connected even if physically they don't feel able to attend?

What is the future of our music program? Do we want to grow that part of our ministry? Do we want to focus on the spiritual and emotional growth and development people experience through participation in communal and multigenerational music making by increasing opportunities for this? Adding a music-oriented service perhaps? Are there ways to increase our social programming or new member integration? And there is always the endless quest for new members as the old ones die or move away from us.

The Board is our congregation's organizer to take our collective energy, recognize the themes, assess their importance to us, and prioritize them into a vision for how, when and where we want to move into the future.

This is why it is so important for *all of us* to prioritize attending the World Café after the service this coming Sunday. We'll be addressing questions like:

- What is the congregation's greatest strength/challenge?
- What keeps you coming here? What motivates you here?
- What would you want more of here? What would you want less of?
- What you love most about Albany UU?
- What do you need most from Albany UU?
- What values of yours would you like to see embodied by Albany UU?
- What is your dream for Albany UU? What would Albany UU look like if you woke up and dream came true?

These are some of the same questions we asked at the start-up weekend. They are visioning questions that will help the Board hear the congregation and identify those themes for the future. No one person will shape that vision, it emerges out of small group conversations at each table. And each voice is needed in the process of discerning where we together want to go. No one person will have that vision but together we can discover and formulate it.

This is the beauty of our governance and our way of doing religion. We listen together for the movement of the spirit and bring it to life. Good process can free us from the tyranny of individualism and connect us to a source greater than any one of us.

Governance is spiritual work and it needs every one of us for that work to come to life.

See you next Sunday!