

Annual Report from the Minister

for the Unitarian Universalists of Southern Delaware

respectfully submitted by Rev. Heather Rion Starr
written in May, 2023

Wow, so much can happen in a single year, am I right? When I look back on the Report I wrote for UUSD last year at this time, I am amazed at all that has happened since then. This is a lively, dedicated, dynamic congregation, and I am grateful and honored to serve as your Minister.

There is such a week-in, week-out rhythm to congregational life, and it's difficult to convey that in an annual reflection. I appreciate all the interactions I have with so many of you, all the meetings, all the e-mails, all the notes and texts. Annual highlights aside, it is good to be in community with you on a day-in, day-out basis. Thanks to all those who have served on the Board of Trustees these year, to our dedicated staff both salaried and contract, to all of you who serve on Committees, who volunteer, who contribute your time, talent, and/or treasure in any and all of the ways that you do.

My primary areas of focus at UUSD continue to be: **worship preparation & leadership, pastoral care & membership** (including getting to know newercomers), **staff support**, and **supporting congregational maturation** (such as working with the Board on the Organizational Chart—thank you Kent Sprunger for taking on updating that!—and supporting our July 28-30, 2023 all-congregational weekend with Consultant Mark Ewert on “Searching for the Future”).

In this second year with you, I have felt more at liberty to try some new things in worship. I have heard more than one person comment “wow, every Sunday is different, here!” and I relish finding that balance between the comfort of familiar ritual and the freshness of doing things on Sunday mornings in new and different (and not always predictable!) ways. The Worship Committee and I continue to work well together and look ahead at Sundays when I will not be leading the service; we continue to identify new voices to invite in as guest speakers while also being committed to incorporating treasured lay-led services led by UUSD Members. When I look back through our (improved this year, through Google Workspace) Worship Committee records, highlights include September's Water Ceremony, the MultiGen services including those *Encanto*-inspired (October), *Oskar and the Eight Blessings*-based (December), and “The Right Way to Right Speech” (with the “Fresh Fish Sold Here Daily” sign), the poignant All Souls Day service and service on Suicide, kicking off our FY24 Pledge Drive (“Dream It! Do It!”) and hosting (the historically-reenacted) Dorothea Dix, the Easter service with the Choir jubilantly singing Elton John's “I'm Still Standing,” and other spring joys and surprises yet to come, including June's Flower Ceremony and Music Sunday.

Administratively and on our Staff Team, in September we said goodbye to Nancy Cordes as she relocated up to northern Delaware, and welcomed Sandy Scheet-Robitaille as our next Office Administrator. Sandy has done a fabulous job getting settled into the role of Office Admin and also getting acquainted with Unitarian Universalism and all of us.

After much behind-the-scenes reflection, effort, and outreach, we are bringing on an hourly Audio-Visual Specialist to start training in June so that she can take over this crucial Sunday role starting in July. I know you'll all welcome Cheryl Hickey to our UUSD Team as that AV Specialist! I have also gained a deeper appreciation for all that our contract-Bookkeeper, Leah Thompson, has been doing for UUSD for the past now-eight years, and will be doing more to appreciate her work for us, as appropriate. And of course we are in the throes, as I write this Report on May 1, of interviewing, contacting references for, and getting to know applicants for our half-time Director of Faith Exploration for Children and Youth position, to start work August 1. I am so grateful that we have had multiple strong applicants for that position, and I know our children, youth and families—as well as all of us who've been working together to support our whole multigenerational and family program (huge thanks to Dar Sellers!)—will be in good hands as we move into the next congregational year.

Together, we have continued to get accustomed to using Breeze as our congregational database (which we officially transitioned to using in January 2022). As many of you now know, I love paper in all its tactile forms, so I wasn't entirely sure myself about working with all our data and contact info for everyone using a smartphone app (along with its website). It turns out that Breeze has been wonderfully effective at enabling us to streamline, clarify, and simplify the many categories that people were previously grouped in. For all those of you who are Members or Friends and access Breeze, you automatically view all other Members, Friends, salaried Staff, and those people who are in our database as "Nonmember Spouse/Partner" of a Member—that's who is in our "Directory." Everyone is asked before their status is ever changed from Visitor to Friend or Member, because (as it is made clear to them), then their record will show up in our Directory (and be seen by other Members & Friends). This may seem overly detailed to you, but I am convinced that if those visiting UUSD take the time and effort to give us their contact info, they are usually hoping to have some kind of contact or followup from us. With around 500 Visitors (in-person and via our website) in Breeze, having ways to continually improve our outreach to and followup with newercomers is an ongoing priority.

And there is only so much time in a week, I know. I strive to meet weekly with Office Administrator Sandy Scheet-Robitaille and Director of Music Ministries Julie Keefer. In a typical month, I attend the bi-monthly Board meetings, Executive Team meetings (typically 2 mornings/month), monthly meetings of the Social & Environmental Justice Committee, Finance Committee, Adult & Children/Youth Faith Exploration Committees, Worship Committee, Membership Committee, the Pastoral Care Associates, the Committee on Congregational Life (CCL), and FUNdraising Committee, and Covenant Group, Pledge Campaign Team, and Church Council meetings as they occur. I have also tried to sit-in on or touch base with Property Management, Safer Congregation Committee, Communications and Governance Review meetings or leaders as I am able. Additionally, I would include in the Pastoral Care vein meetings with individuals and couples regarding preparing memorial services and weddings, and get-to-know-each-other-individually conversations with members, newercomers and those considering UUSD membership.

Connecting with colleagues is crucial for sustaining this work, and I also find it energizing and see it as part of my responsibility to represent UUSD locally & regionally. In my time at UUSD, we have now become active members of both the regional Multi-Faith Community and the Lewes-Rehoboth Association of Congregations (L-RAC) (both involve meetings, of course). This year I have visited the Dover Air Force Base (DAFB) Chaplaincy Team and am proud to represent Unitarian Universalism, as well as ministry and spiritual care for people who are not affiliated with a religious community (“nones”), in ongoing conversations with DAFB. I meet monthly with the Priestley-Kingsbury UU Ministers Association Chapter, with a long-time, small Online UU Clergy Cluster, and this spring I have re-initiated monthly Coaching sessions with a UU mentor/Coach via Zoom. I have been serving on the Starr King School for the Ministry’s Graduate Association and I will be continuing in that volunteer role in the coming year. I am the Mentor for a colleague in Preliminary Fellowship and meet monthly with her/them. I continue to try to take Mondays off and to limit evening meetings whenever possible so that I might be present with my family. Thank you for your support and understanding when I do take some time to “check out” and get refreshed, now-and-then.

This congregation's Mission is to: **Nurture spiritual growth, Embrace diversity, Work for justice, and Strive for a loving world.** How are we keeping that Mission at the forefront of all our decision-making about what comes next and how we go about it? I know that this is the guiding question for me as we make our way forward, together. It is a joy to be co-creating Unitarian Universalist-grounded community with you, and I thank you all for your dedication, generosity, warmth, invitation into your homes and lives, and your continued engagement and support of this ever-evolving community.