

Annual Report from the Minister

for the Unitarian Universalists of Southern Delaware

respectfully submitted by Rev. Heather Rion Starr
written in April, 2024

With the conclusion of this congregational year on June 30, there is a threshold crossing—a very subtle one, but meaningful nonetheless. As we move together into continued planning for FY25 and with our Searching for the Future efforts looking ahead to 2029(!), I am aware that this is a quietly Big Deal for UUSD. This congregation has not had a long stretch of years without ministerial transition for...a while, and stability in the ministerial role makes a big difference for most faith communities. In other words: how lovely it is to know one another pretty well, now, and what shall we do together now that we're past the "getting to know each other" (broadly speaking) phase?

UUSD continues to be a lively, dedicated, dynamic congregation, and I am grateful and honored to serve as your Minister. 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 lead Covenant or Affinity Groups, 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 our Office Administrator on how to build on our use of Breeze such that we can do a search for who-is-serving-on-what-Committee, or addressing with the Executive Team our need to have a more formal Rental process and support system for rentals).

In this third year with you, I have felt a deeper settling in to some of our shared rhythms and routines. 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. We are blessed with so much wisdom, expertise, talent, and generosity of spirit in this congregation. When I look back through our Worship Committee shared documents (thanks to Google Workspace!), highlights from just the first months of FY24 include Summer Services, September's Water Ceremony and the creation of a multigenerational Rainbow Banner (that is now in the CFE Nursery/CFE Director's Office), hearing from our Primary Contact with the UUA Lenore Bajare-Dukes (Oct 2023 "Get Messy!" service), the lay-led group of speakers on Aging (Oct 2023), the...er, remarkable Multi-Gen Addams Family service leading us into Halloween, and our annual All Souls Day service. Services have focused on the Affordable Housing Crisis in Sussex County, Transgender Day of Remembrance (with the Choir singing the beautiful "How Did You Feel?" song), Lifelong Learning, How We Define Religion (and What Is Religion *For?*), "What Is Time?," Maintaining Relationships while having vastly

different opinions about issues, “But Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?,” Lesser-known Figures in the Civil Rights Movement, Living with Depression (Feb) or Trauma (April), kicking off our FY25 Pledge Drive (“Deep Roots, New Growth”), Being In Gardens, and of course, this congregation’s 25th Anniversary! And there are other spring joys yet to come, including May’s New Member Ceremony, June’s Flower Ceremony and Music Sunday.

Administratively and on our Staff Team, Sandy Scheet-Robitaille has settled in as our Office Administrator and does so much to keep UUSD running smoothly on a day-to-day basis. In October 2023, we celebrated Five Years of Julie Keefer working as UUSD’s Director of Music Ministry—hurrah & enormous thanks to Julie for all the time and heart she puts into UUSD’s Music Program. Professor Heather Hamilton came fully on board as our half-time Children’s Faith Exploration Director in January and I already can’t imagine UUSD without her good humor, perseverance, organizational skills and we-can-do-this attitude! (Please take the time to read the annual written reports from these core program staff.)

It has been wonderful to be able to rely upon Audio-Visual Specialists Cheryl Hickey and Brian Tootle to run the tech for our services this past year. I continue to appreciate all that our contract-Bookkeeper, Leah Thompson, has been doing for UUSD for the past now-nine years. We also welcomed Transitional Facilities Pointperson Cheri Garnet onto the staff team in April with hopes that we can, over time, work together to craft this much-needed, paid staff position into something we could post to the larger community with confidence about it averaging a certain number of hours/week.

I strive to meet regularly with Office Administrator Sandy Scheet-Robitaille, Director of Music Ministries Julie Keefer, CFE Director Heather Hamilton, and now Transitional Facilities Pointperson Cheri Garnet. 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 Council, Pledge Team, and Church Council meetings as they occur. 25th Anniversary Committee meetings have been a special project this congregational year, and those will continue through 2024. I have also tried to sit-in on or touch base with Property Management, Safer Congregation Committee, Communications, and Leadership Development Committee meetings or leaders as I am able. UUSD now includes active members of both the regional Multi-Faith Community and the Lewes-Rehoboth Association of Congregations (L-RAC)—my thanks to our UUSD’rs who maintain these relationships. 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, people going through difficult or challenging times in their lives, 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. I attended the

Priestley-Kingsbury UU Ministers Association Chapter January (2024) Gathering at Pendle Hill outside Philadelphia; I also meet monthly with a long-time, small Online UU Clergy Cluster. I have been serving on the Starr King School for the Ministry's Graduate Association Executive Team and I will be continuing in that volunteer role. I am the Mentor for a colleague in Preliminary Fellowship and meet monthly with 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 reenergized, now-and-then.

Looking ahead, CFE Director Heather Hamilton and I have been hard at work planning for the significant Our Whole Lives (OWL) sexuality education curriculum to be offered for 7th-to-9th graders in the fall—it's an over-20-session program with a lot of guidance from the UUA insuring that we have a full cadre of trained adult Leader-Volunteers, and I am so grateful to everyone involved in making it possible for us offer this important program to middle-schoolers and their families in Sussex County. OWL is just one of several projects I and other UUSD'rs are already working towards for next year. I'm excited to have our new Searching for the Future 2025-2029 Strategic Plan in hand as we all progress into the future together.

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? 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 with and support of this ever-evolving community.