

## **ON THE FUTURE OF MINISTRY**

This year, we are structuring our Virtual Ministry Days to create space for important collegial conversations about particular dimensions of ministry in our current context. Our goal is not to lament what has been lost (though we do believe that spaces and places are needed for some to lament what has been lost in our vocation), but rather to embrace what is and share and dream with one another about the exploration and innovation we all need to be engaged in, now and in the future.

## **COLLEGIAL CONVERSATIONS**

Our two collegial conversation spaces will offer facilitated breakout sessions for participants to discuss the following topics:

- Changing patterns in volunteerism
- Conflict
- Congregational Accountability
- Credentialing
- Faith Formation and Family Ministry
- Ministry in a time of climate despair and global crises
- Opportunities and challenges in bi, co and multi-vocational ministry
- Opportunities and challenges in chaplaincy
- Opportunities and challenges in innovative ministries
- Opportunities and challenges in spiritual direction
- Search and Settlement
- Seeding and sharing successes in ministry
- Stewardship and finances in ministry
- Transitions
- Widening difference in skills needed in large and small congregations
- Widening the Circle and Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppressive, Multicultural ministry skills
- Working conditions, including compensation and benefits, time off
- Youth Ministry

## **A CONTEXT FOR TODAY**

Some things have become clear about the context in which we are ministering today. We are in an era of declining religious affiliation in the United States. The twin pandemics of Covid-19 and structural racism accelerated this trend, which has been unfolding over decades. Canada, Western Europe, Australia, and other economically prosperous nations have progressed even further in this secularizing trajectory. Decreasing religious affiliation in

these countries is coupled with decreasing religious observation, less frequent attendance, and less robust participation in congregations (including volunteering, leading, giving, worshiping, faith formation, etc.). This is especially true among children, youth, and young adults.

Meanwhile, the status of clergy continues to decline in society at large. Being a clergy person is no longer widely held in high esteem among the professions. The factors influencing this change are many including high profile reports of clergy misconduct alongside the declining status observed in many fields when women enter in greater numbers. The declining status of clergy, coupled with the polarization in society, conflicts in congregations, and congregational resistance to change, has been demoralizing to many clergy people. These stressors have been compounded by the way the role of parish ministry has changed, particularly with regard to the importance and function of technology in congregational life as a consequence of the Covid 19 pandemic. All of these factors have contributed to greater rates of discontentment among the clergy and a greater number of clergy considering leaving the vocation.

## **UU TRENDS**

Our in-person congregational attendance rates are down, especially among children, youth, and young adults. Our total attendance increased slightly since the widespread adoption of online worship options. However, online worship and faith formation are proving to be less appealing as an ongoing option for connection among younger people.

With regard to the clergy, we have noted an increase in the number of clergy retiring alongside a decreasing number of people able or willing to relocate for a ministry due to a range of factors calling people to geographical rootedness. Consequently, there have not been enough ministers available for all open congregational ministry positions in recent cycles.

However, our credentialing office staff have identified that we have not seen a decline in people preparing for the Unitarian Universalist ministry overall. While the number of people preparing has remained steady, greater numbers of people are pursuing a call to community rather than congregational ministry, which also impacts the pool of potential ministers available to congregations.

We are also observing increasing numbers of congregational ministry positions that are less than full time, which accords with reports from other faith traditions about the rise in bi-vocational, co-vocational and multi-vocational ministries.

## **A HUNGER FOR MEANING**

On the hopeful side of the equation, despite higher rates of religious disaffiliation, many people continue to identify themselves as spiritual and express openness to spiritual exploration. This is especially true among Millennials, Gen Z, and Gen Alpha. The hunger for meaning and connection in our age of ephemera and loneliness is very real. There is great opportunity for clergy who are interested in innovating, experimenting, and exploring what kinds of religious leadership can engage the spiritual curiosity and meet the spiritual needs of youth and young and emerging adults within and beyond the structures of congregations.

## **COMMITMENT TO COLLECTIVE LIBERATION**

As each generation becomes even more multiculturally diverse than their elders, younger people expect their communities to reflect and embrace that diversity. Leadership that advances diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging while supporting a range of ways to engage spiritually for collective liberation is vital, not only in congregations, but also in the growing disciplines of chaplaincy and spiritual direction and in all the innovative settings where clergy practice ministry in the community. The continuing widespread interest in and openness to spirituality is hopeful because research demonstrates that being able to draw on spiritual resources is key to human resiliency and human flourishing. Our society is in great need of leaders called to promote the gospels of love, justice, equity, pluralism, generosity, interdependence, and transformation for the flourishing of all, including our beloved Earth. In a time of multiple and ongoing global crises, the work we are called to is vitally important and makes a real and meaningful difference. We must remember this, with and for each other.

## **PRACTICES FOR AN EMERGING FUTURE**

Many of the things clergy learned during formation 20 or 30 years ago about how to fulfill our roles need to be updated for this changed landscape. Many observers have noted we are living in liminal times. We need to learn new practices to equip us for the emerging future. Clergy continuing education is essential for all and especially critical for clergy who have not recently refreshed their knowledge and skills. We also need partners who can encourage and inspire us in our experimentation and exploration. Mentoring is a practice to invest in and extend. Many think of mentoring primarily as a resource for clergy early in formation. In reality, younger people in our current context hold understandings and wisdom that are essential for long-tenured clergy to learn and understand. Cross-generational mentoring relationships hold a great deal of promise and potential.

Learning and experimenting, reflecting, and refining our approaches for ministry in our time and context will need to be ongoing practices. There is tremendous potential for spiritual innovation in our congregations and in our communities beyond our congregations, and so many promising developments in the wide landscape of innovative and community ministries, including the strong potential for more partnerships between community and parish ministries. The increasing attention afforded to identifying and nurturing the particular gifts of bi, co and multi vocational ministries is another promising development. There are many reasons for hope. And, we must not underestimate the challenges of ministry in a time of growing religious disaffiliation when the role of the clergy is neither widely understood nor widely respected. Clergy need strong relationships with other clergy who understand the joys and challenges of this vocation, believe in its promise, and can create and help sustain supportive and accountable communities of care to accompany us through the challenges and nurture our collective flourishing.

## **BECAUSE WE NEED ONE ANOTHER**

We cannot expect things to return to the way they were. While some congregations are thriving in ways that look familiar to many of us, the landscape in which we now practice is undeniably different than it used to be when some of us came into ministry. The UUMA is committed to being a trustworthy source of resources and support as

we navigate this time of change. Look for new resources and opportunities for learning. Draw on each other's wisdom through mentoring, coaching, and collegial connections. There is no map to guide us, but together, we can explore, innovate, reflect on what we are discovering, and find our way forward.

We hope you will plan to join us for our Ministry Days conversations. Your voice and experience are important. We want to know what you are thinking and feeling and learn from the experiments you are trying in your setting. Now and always, we need one another.

In faith, Melissa and Janette

UUMA Executive Leadership Team

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