

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Good Morning! First, a little bit about me. My name is Sarah Seder. I joined the church 35 years ago when my family moved to Waterville. I have two grown sons who live in NYC and Philadelphia. Before retiring seven years ago I worked in Human Resources, primarily in training and development. I worked for *KVCAP* for 15 years and then for *MaineGeneral* for another 15. This church has been my anchor and community for all that time.

Today is Annual Meeting Sunday. This is the day we put our faith into action again, using our 7 UU Principles and a democratic process. Prior to the meeting I wanted to take this opportunity to provide a little background and context.

In terms of the big picture, I won't even attempt to describe the events that have occurred in our country and around the world over the past year. These are disturbing and soul-searching times for many of us. We have taken this opportunity to lean on and extend our spiritual community and thereby gained strength both individually and as a church.

In terms of our church, I thought it might be helpful to look at where we've been and where we're at now because at the meeting in some ways we'll determine where we're going. Typically, the primary action items on the agenda at this meeting are the same: We need to vote on the proposed nominees for the Board of Trustees. And we need to vote on the proposed budget for the coming year.

Who We Are

In terms of **leadership of the church**, "it takes a village" so we have several designated leaders:

- 1) Spiritual Leaders – We are fortunate that Rev. Twinkle Marie Manning provides us with three Sunday church services per month. In addition, many of our formal and informal leaders as well as church members provide us with spiritual inspiration.
- 2) Administrative Leader – Beth Schiller – among many things she oversees our crucial internal and external communications including our web site, Mid-Week Update, Orders of Service etc., and assures our church documents and data are organized and saved electronically.
- 3) Governing Leaders - The 10-member Board of Trustees oversees the property and business of the church. It also creates and enforces policies, based on recommendations of other church leaders and members.
- 4) Functional Leaders – There are several individuals, teams, and committees who ensure that various functions of the church meet the needs and priorities of our members. Some of those individual or team functions are Property and Grounds, Worship, Technology, Stewardship, Fellowship, Membership, Finance, Music, Caring, etc. (Annual reports of some committees were sent to you prior to this meeting.)

Note – A few leaders receive a small stipend for their work, but most are volunteers, some donating up to 20 hours/week!

- 5) **Unsung heroes** – These are the behind-the-scenes members, friends, and paid staff who contribute to our church life in so many ways, including Hospitality teams, the bookkeeper, snow removers, mowers, gardeners, housekeeping, and many others.

THANK YOU ALL!

Current Status – Membership and Attendance have increased

I am happy to report that effective last Sunday, Church Membership increased from 64 to 73 active members.

Since COVID 19 when we held Zoom-only services on Sundays, church attendance has rebounded to an average of 54 people per service. The last few coffeehouses have averaged over 70 people in attendance.

“The Downstairs Church” – There are two aspects: 1) - The mid-week, mid-day programs - Wednesday Arts and Crafts, Thursday Men’s Coffee, Friday Meditation, and Friday Women’s Group. Although we don’t keep track of the number of individuals who participate in these programs, many additional “friends” of the church attend.

2) – The Coffeehouses – These first Sunday of the month gatherings were an experiment at first that have been extremely popular. This was an idea about building community and sharing our hearts, values, music, words, space, and food. They are now one of our strongest features.

Current Status – Financial – to be revealed at our Annual Meeting. Short version – we don’t have quite enough income to cover our operating expenses. But we do have reserves and with all of your help, I am hopeful that we can balance the budget. More on that at the Meeting.

Highlights of our church year...Luckily, our church year has been relatively smooth and free of crises. Here are some highlights...

- 1) Last May, Church members approved up to \$25,000 to give Averill Parlors a badly needed makeover: a thorough cleaning, decisive removal of “stuff,” new overhead lights, new floor, new paint on walls and trim, and more! We are very pleased with our clean, bright, de-cluttered space.
- 2) Also last May, our members and friends identified four priorities for the coming year. Much discussion and activity took place, and all areas were at least explored.
 - Growing the church membership – Some of these activities included starting to use Facebook more effectively; starting a new monthly evening dinner/discussion group;

offering a free community breakfast, and creating a very successful pizza/potluck dinner for members of the LGBTQ+ community. Additionally, our Fellowship team reached out to inactive members and encouraged them to consider participating again.

- Connecting with our Community – Participation in existing Social Justice activities was formalized, such as Third Act (climate action, including MEPERS fossil fuel divestiture). Several members are now active with the Capitol Area New Mainers group as family support advocates. After November 2024 many members led or joined local social justice action groups in community organizing postcard campaigns, demonstrations, rallies, etc.
- Exploring alternatives to our Board of Trustees form of governance – Last winter several church leaders met four times to discuss our shared leadership model, its strengths and weaknesses, but did not make any recommendations for change at this time.
- Researching the costs of, and interest in, hiring a part-time contract UU minister. A Worship Committee survey indicated that most members were satisfied with our existing arrangement with Rev. Manning. Also, the cost of a part-time UU minister would have required substantially more funds than we could imagine raising. Discussion of the issue was therefore tabled.

Other notable events

Last summer, the crumbling wall between the Averill Parlors entrance walkway and the parking lot was demolished. The opposite wall was patched and painted. Huge improvement!

In late fall, thanks in large part to a member family's generous donation and a few strong backs, a new church sign was erected on our lawn – replacing a badly stained and distressed one.

In December we had our traditional and successful Holiday Fair and Cookie Walk – our primary public fundraiser – this year raising over \$5,000 from food, crafts, and the “UU Mall.”

In March, after the Board had discussed the UUA's new “Shared Values,” Rev. Manning introduced these Values to the congregation during a Sunday Service. Our church has added the Values as complementary to the existing 7 UU Principles, as represented in flyers and posters and other printed material.

In sum, it has been a very full year. We have worked hard to keep the church moving forward and now we are seeing increased energy and more emerging leadership. Thanks to you, our church is alive and well.