

Minister's Board Report for November

November Activities (from board meeting in October to board meeting in November)

Committee/Team meetings attended: worship associates, social justice council, coordinating team, pastoral associates, program council, Widening the Circle book task force, staff meetings, Reopening task force, chalice circles leaders

Other meetings or church events attended: attended ordination of UUCBer Stephanie Kroner, attended white caucus (WOWS), local interfaith ministers group, LFDC program on Indigenous Peoples month, presented a mental health first aid training for the staff, led drop-in groups following election day

Worship & Rites: led three Sunday worship services, led two Vespers services and one in-person vigil the day after the election, timeline and scheduling for December holiday worship services

Other: attended interfaith program on spiritually grounding our anti-racism work, preparations and pre-recordings for the two workshops that I'll be leading at the annual interim ministry network conference (one on visitor welcoming and the other on financial changes and downsizing in congregations)

Instead of breaking this report down by focuses of interim ministry, this month I'm going to provide a more comprehensive analysis of a single aspect of the congregation: how we invite and welcome visitors, or more specifically, how we publicize our programs to potential visitors and welcome them into our programs.

In the area of visitor welcoming, there are many aspects and many things that can be created or fine-tuned and such. However, it hinges on a potential visitor participating in a program or event that is meaningful for them in some way. There are three types of programs or events that this might refer to: regular worship services, entry events, and side-door events. An entry event is a larger scale program or event that is particularly well suited to visitors and is a good way to get a direct taste of the congregation. A side-door event isn't necessarily marketed like an entry event, and a visitor wouldn't think of their involvement in a side-door event like they were trying to get a taste of the congregation but rather would simply be engaging in a program, usually a longer-term program, on the merits of the program itself but also be getting a taste of the congregation at the same time.

Ideally, there are at least 8-12 entry events per year and perhaps 2 or 3 specifically created side-door events. And of course there's the normal Sunday morning worship. Aside from Sunday welcoming, which we are still feeling our way through in the new reality of virtual worship, the main way we attract visitors is through the entry level events. Alright, that's the background, and now for my assessment, specifically of our entry level events, which one might think of as the "low hanging fruit" of attracting visitors.

Overall, I have found a lot of frustration and deep disappointment about our entry level events. Now we have a lot of programs with a lot of great potential for this, but we are completely

falling down on marketing them and on welcoming new folks into them. Let me analyze a few recent ones.

WOWS/POCC joint meeting, which happens maybe once or twice a year: This could have been a phenomenal welcoming event, highlighting the emphasis that UUCB places on its anti-racism work, how it is in sync with up-to-date work on advocacy and awareness and identity-based groups. But here's the catch – it wasn't advertised anywhere that visitors would see. I was planning to attend myself, as it had been discussed at a Social Justice council meeting. But when the time came for the program, the link was nowhere to be found and it wasn't posted anywhere – not on our website, calendar, week ahead email, or Facebook page. When I inquired the following week after hearing folks were disappointed that I hadn't been there, I was told that the advertisement only went out on the email lists and they hadn't wanted to post it further for worry of zoom-bombers. I didn't see any notices about it in the few days before the event on the discuss list, and I'm not on the social justice list. It might have been only advertised there.

LFDC program for indigenous peoples history month on 11/1: This was a perfect entry event, exactly the sort of thing that I would want visitors to attend. It was listed in a few places, which I found later as I scrambled to find the link. I was a participant in the program, but I was late because it took me 20 minutes to find a link for it, which is far longer than any visitor will search for something. Let me take you through the sequence of events, and please imagine what a visitor might be going through – I checked the main page of the website, no listing. Just the Sunday service and coffee hour. I looked through the recent Facebook posts: no listing. I checked the calendar: it was listed there but with no link. I checked the Social Justice news page on the website and then the main Social Justice page: no listing in either place. I looked at the notice sent out on the discuss list a few days before the event: no link in the body of the email. A visitor would have given up long before this. After going through them all again, I finally found the link listed at the bottom of the flyer attached to the email on the discuss list and was able to log on. Later in the day, an email specifically about the event with a link came through the discuss list, but mine hadn't arrived prior to the event start time.

Then let's talk about Personal Theology and Humanist Connections, our long-standing Sunday programs which are also crucial entry events and religious exploration for newcomers. Neither are listed on the calendar or on the webpage lists of events. Neither are advertised on the Facebook page. While the time for Humanist Connections is listed on the Humanist Connections page (which it is less likely that a visitor would find – that's too many clicks in on the webpage), there are no zoom links provided and the links to the Beacon and Week Ahead for more information are broken and go to error pages at the moment. I can't even find the time for Personal Theology anywhere – you have to know when and where it is to actually show up. I tried to attend Humanist Connections on Sunday, found a link that Sunday and went at the time listed with the link to find myself in an empty zoom room. I went back 10 minutes later thinking maybe they're running a minute or two behind to find myself still in an empty zoom room. I found out later that the wrong time had been listed with the announcement.

Folks, do we actually want visitors? My experience is that we have a resounding “NO” for that question. This seems to be far more than a technical challenge (i.e. one with a clear solution and clear answers) and rather an adaptive challenge (i.e. one where the questions and challenge aren’t even clear). Since arriving, I have already pushed many leaders and staff members about putting their information for these programs into places that visitors would find them, and listed off the places. I’ve reminded folks for specific programs, including the ones just listed. I’ve thrown minor fits. And yet, changes have not occurred.

This is not a technical or easy fix. It is much deeper, and bears a need for a good bit of reflection. What is actually going on here? Is it that we have trust issues around visitors or folks who are unknown to us? What are we afraid of? We are still afraid of zoom-bombers despite the fact that we have good processes in place to deal with them. Why do we make folks go through all of these hoops before having access to our programming – are we prequalifying them? Making sure they fit certain standards of behavior? Making sure they will assimilate well enough?

I was asked an unusually high number of questions once I started that almost felt like pre-qualification questions and ones to make sure that my answers matched the standard at the church well enough. Now this makes sense for your minister, somewhat. I will admit that it was a much greater degree of this kind of questioning than I have faced at any other UU church. But another question that raises itself is whether we are doing this sort of thing to our church visitors and newcomers, whether consciously or unconsciously.

So, what can be done to address this issue? One thing that will NOT work is asking folks to advertise better, because I’ve already tried this several times and nothing has changed. What we need is some deeper examination of the dynamics that are really at play – talking about these in a number of different circles at the church and seeing where this leads us. Trying to hone in on some of the adaptive challenges and questions that are underneath our reluctance to welcome new folks into our church. Naming those and then asking what can be done to shift them. Is this comfortable work – no. Is it fast or easy – no. Is it worthwhile – absolutely. Let’s start the conversation...