



2024 Minister's Report

Rev. Dr. Oscar Sinclair

Narrative

Process Note

This is my final annual report to the Unitarian Church of Lincoln. On April 21, I accepted a call to serve as senior minister at Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul Minnesota, starting August 1, 2024. The transitions process, including an introduction of incoming interim senior minister Rev. A.J. Galazen, is detailed elsewhere in the annual report. This section of the report will be divided into two sections: the first reporting on my work during the 2023-24 congregational year, and the second taking a longer look at the arc of our shared ministry from 2017-24.

2023-24 Annual Report

At the September 2023 Board of Trustees meeting, I laid out six areas of congregational life I anticipated would become major projects during this congregational year: worship, membership, bylaws, stewardship (with subsequent implications for staffing), Justice in Action, and our mission and vision. Over the last nine months each has taken center stage at different times:

Worship

In October 2023, I led a five-session adult education program on constructing worship, beginning with a sermon idea and progressing through writing a sermon and developing other parts of a worship service. The program was well-attended, and several of the services that participants developed were eventually part of Sunday morning worship this year. We also developed some new processes on the back end of worship, integrating weekly orders of service into our primary planning document, and moving the creation of the weekly slideshow to the Administrative Director's portfolio. This spring, long time Worship Associates chair Jaime Radcliffe finished his time in that role, with Kathy Disney stepping in as the new chair of the Worship Associates.

Membership

Several external events affected our membership program this year. UCL lost our membership associate position in the budget cuts the congregation voted on at the December meeting. At the same meeting, a change in the bylaws opened up the definition of membership – defining membership through support of UCL's mission and vision, rather than a financial pledge. We have added 14 new members since January 1, one of the largest cohorts of new members since 2016. How the congregation will integrate these new members and continue to reach out to visitors from the community in the absence of a dedicated staff person will be an area of continued work in the coming year.



Bylaws

UCL's last major bylaws revision took place in 2017-18, and our bylaws require that we consider changes every five years. The 2023 revisions focused on simplifying the congregation's bylaws, using plain language whenever possible and removing repetitive and unused bylaws. These revisions were voted on by the congregation at the December 2023 congregational meeting, after a year long process of revision and discernment.

Stewardship

Stewardship was a primary theme of the first half of this congregational year. From 2020-2022, as the congregation responded to the uncertainty of the COVID pandemic, we engaged in three supplemental pledge drives, as well as seeking pandemic relief funding as a bridge in some uncertain years. In the 2023 pledge drive, we set out to establish a baseline of the congregation's income moving forward, without secondary asks or outside funding. The pledge drive was successful, in that we received more pledges of financial support than we have any year I have served in Lincoln. Unfortunately, because of inflation and the intentional lack of a second ask, the board was left with a \$50,000 gap between income and expenses for the 2024 budget. While we were able to make up some of that gap through cuts to programming, it required significant cuts to staff hours, detailed in the next subsection.

Staffing

Based on sustained annual budget shortfall over the past three years, the congregation made the following permanent cuts to hours for staff positions in the 2024 budget:

Religious Growth and Learning Director 40 hrs □ 30 hrs
Administrative Director, 40 hrs □ 30 hrs
Music Director, 20 hrs □ 15 hrs
Membership Coordinator, 10 hrs □ 0 hrs

In addition, I agreed to a one-time, three-month furlough without pay over the course of 2024. The first month of furlough was April, the second July, the third would have been a month in the fall. Overall, this represents the loss of approximately one full time equivalent position, spread out across multiple departments. A description of how those hour cuts affected staff portfolios is available in the March Newsletter, linked here: [March 2024 Beacon](#).

Justice in Action

The congregation's work with Justice in Action over the last year has been a bright spot. In October, I was elected co-president of the coalition of 24 churches and religious communities in Lincoln, working to expand access to pre-trial diversion, mental health care, and affordable housing in Lancaster County. It has been amazing to watch members of this congregation take multiple leadership roles in Justice in Action, working in partnership with other communities that do not share our theology but do share our commitment to justice. Our Nehemiah Assembly in May, which gathered 1,200 people of faith (including 167 Unitarians) to present concrete proposals to public officials was thrilling. Several days later, the [Lincoln Journal Star ran an editorial](#), which concluded:



“Justice in Action is ultimately more than a group pointing out problems. They are offering solutions, including, for example, a public education campaign to reduce the stigma around mental health and creating a mediation process for those facing eviction. Local officials should not only open their ears but look seriously at these ideas.

The coalition also should be commended for bringing together people of different faiths and backgrounds who can unite behind these common causes. In our increasingly polarized world, these groups served as an example of how unity — not division — can spur action.”

Mission and Vision

This is one area of congregational life that I was not able to spend as much time on as anticipated this year. Part of that is operational: other things often took priority, and this important-but-not-urgent work often ended up on the back burner. Additionally, it is good and appropriate work for a congregation to engage in during an interim ministry, so once it became clear that this might be my last year with UCL, I stopped pushing this work forward.

Reflections on Transition

This was not the year that I imagined leaving the Unitarian Church of Lincoln. There is still work to be done here, and while I am excited about the next steps for me and for UCL, I hold some grief that those steps will not be together. The [sermon on May 5](#) and the June newsletter both contain more information about the reasons for my departure. Briefly: they are varied, including family circumstances, finances, a unique opportunity, and a large helping of prayer and personal discernment. I am excited at the challenge to serve in St. Paul. I am sad to leave Lincoln. In some ways it is no more complicated than that.

The transition is also a time to take stock of what this ministry that we have shared for seven years. In writing this report, I went back to the documents from the 2017 search that brought me and Stacie to Lincoln. Right under the mission and vision, this is what you wrote about yourselves:

Our church has a reputation in Lincoln for hosting progressive events and for speaking out against injustice...but only among those people who are paying attention. The general population probably assumes we are just like every other church in town. Therefore, we are determined to become more of a presence in our community. We want to be the church that truly lives its mission and shows up when there is hard work to be done in the name of Unitarian Universalist values. We are, of course, currently involved in outreach activities, but want to enhance and expand those offerings and our members' participation in them.

At the end of any ministry, any relationship, there is grief about what is left undone. But reading these hopes that became our collective marching orders, I am proud of what we did



together. The Unitarian Church of Lincoln in 2024 is not the best kept secret in Lancaster County. We are known as a presence at events, a church that lives into its mission and shows up. Attached to the end of this report is my usual timeline of the last year, but also a timeline of major projects of seven years, laying out the arc of this ministry. We have done a lot together to be proud of.

Thanks

For the last several years, it has been my practice to end my annual report by thanking our outgoing Board members. **Meg Mering** and **JoEllen Polzien** have served this congregation well and faithfully over the last three years. **Elle Straatmann**, who agreed to serve an additional year after the end of her term is cycling off the board after five years: first as a board member, then president, then immediate past president, then board member again. This is a vaguely Ripken-like run, and she has been a wise and compassionate voice throughout. **Kim Ziemann** finishes her year as congregational president this month. I am sorry for the number of headaches I have brought to her attention this year, and hope that this congregation has some understanding of the grace she has brought to an exceptionally challenging board year.

During my time in Lincoln, I finished my Doctorate of Ministry. Lovett Weems, a church leadership professor (and a former seminary president) often says that the most important thing you can say in this job is "I am so proud to serve a church that/where _____." He told us to look in a mirror and practice that phrase, even when we were 'hopping mad.' Members of the Unitarian Church of Lincoln: I have never, once, struggled to find things to be proud of this congregation for. It has been an honor to serve here, and I am grateful for all of you.



2023-24 Timeline of Major Projects

June

- General Assembly, Pittsburgh, PA

July-August

- Outdoor worship service at Antelope Park
- Board of Trustees Summer Retreat

September

- Congregational year begins with Ingathering
- Stewardship Campaign Launches

October

- Justice in Action Community Problems Assembly, Oscar elected co-president
- Worship workshop

November

- Budget process continues

December

- Winter Congregational Meeting, UCL passes revised bylaws, 2024 budget

January

- Continued aftermath of winter congregational meeting, staff cuts

February

- Board of Trustees Winter Retreat
- Owing Your Religious Past Adult Education Workshop

March

- Rev. Sinclair's Departure Announced

April

- Furloughed

May

- Justice in Action Nehemiah Assembly
- Transitions process continues

June

- General Assembly (online)
- Oscar's departure



2017-18

- UUA Start Up Workshop
- Bylaws Revision
- Began using Soul Matters worship and small group ministry themes
- Departure of Julie Cross, hiring of Dr. Bob Fuson as Interim Music Director
- Launch of congregational database, Realm
- Oscar on parental leave for 6 weeks following birth of Ailish Margaret
- Joint service of Installation and Ordination, Rev. Natalie Fenimore preaches

2018-19

- Rev. Kimberley Debus leads visioning workshop for music program in September
- Launched Third Thursday worship, Bob Fuson becomes permanent Music Director
- Task Force begins considering adding a second Sunday morning worship service
- Ongoing MFC professional complaint regarding Rev. Justin Osterman
- Religious Growth and Learning Director Chelsea Krafka on sabbatical in spring 2019

2019-20

- UCL expands limited health insurance benefit to part time employees, including increased giving during pledge drive
- Began offering childcare for committee meetings and programs on Wednesday and Thursday nights
- Second Sunday morning service begins in January, including a 30% increase in average attendance over first three months
- Train and launch lay pastoral care program in February 2020
- COVID closes the church building, effective March 15, 2020. In response, the congregation launches many new projects, including:
 - YouTube based Sunday morning worship
 - Weekly Thursday night vespers on Zoom
 - Zoom Coffee Hour and Open Office Hours
 - Daily eBlasts and videos from Rev. Sinclair
 - Text-based giving
 - Music recording
 - UU Connect, weekly small group gatherings led by worship associates
 - First round Payroll Protection Plan funding
- Rev. Sinclair serves as Faith Coalition of Lancaster County president from 2020-22.

2020-21



- From August 2020-May 2021, worship was fully prerecorded, premiering on YouTube each Sunday morning
- Many projects from March and April 2020 are refined, become part of the fabric of the congregation
- 50 UCL members participate in the “Beloved Conversations” program of Meadville-Lombard Theological Seminary
- May 9, 2021 is first service in person at UCL since March 2020
- Second round Payroll Protection Plan funding

2021-22

- Major project of the year is re-entering, exiting, and re-entering UCL's building in response to COVID trends and public health advice
- At December Congregational Meeting, UCL votes to change Rev. Sinclair's title to Senior Minister
- Deepened focus on social justice results in partnerships with OutNebraska, Niskithe Prayer Camp, and early meetings for what will become Justice in Action
- Administrative Director Jean Helms on sabbatical in spring 2022
- Lay led “Summer Indigenous Programming” involving worship, volunteer, and educational opportunities

2022-23

- Justice in Action formally launches in October
- Oral History project gathers stories of the pandemic from over 90 members, interviews are archived in print and audio
- Rev. Sinclair on sabbatical in spring 2023, completes Doctor of Ministry degree.

2023-24

- Major bylaws revision
- Stewardship “reset” results in cuts to staff hours
- Increased attention to adult religious education
- Rev. Sinclair serves as Justice in Action Co-President
- Interim Minister search after Rev. Sinclair announces departure