



Dear Eddie – A (Fairy) Tale about a Friendship across 600 Miles and through Many Walls *by Gabriele Parks*

Once upon a time, in a far away land -- well, actually, Central Pennsylvania -- there was an old retired minister -- well, actually, she wasn't all that old. Anyway, there was this *elderly retired minister* (let's just call her ERM) who was not very happy in her retirement. She missed the folks from her congregation, all those folks who had been her community in this very conservative town. But mostly she missed challenging theological conversations. Honestly! After all, our ERM was a UU ERM, and UUs often have strange hobbies.

This ERM also missed the regular worship services on Sunday, but luckily she found out about the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist. It's a UU church with a loooong name but no walls. Our ERM really enjoyed the weekly Zoom Worship, but it just wasn't enough -- just a one-way experience. Besides that, she wanted to become more actively involved. But what can you do in a church that has no walls? They don't need greeters, or anyone to make coffee or wash the dishes after coffee hour. Nobody is needed to replace light bulbs, clean the bathrooms, install software, make copies, or shovel snow in winter.

But then the ERM met a Fairy Godmother. Her name was Beth Murray. With a single motion of her Magic Wand -- actually the sending of one email -- Beth showed the ERM what she could do: become a pen-pal to one of the many incarcerated UUs. This sounded interesting, and the ERM definitely wanted to help with the "Worthy Now" prison network. She really liked what she read on their website: "Worthy Now invites people on both sides of prison walls into beloved community. We declare that all persons are worthy of love, respect and support, not at some future time when we are better people, but as we are right now."

Happily, the ERM signed up for the program and was soon matched with one of the 1,750 incarcerated Unitarian Universalists, and they lived happily ever after. Well, yes, kinda . . . Of course, it wasn't all that quick and easy. The biggest obstacles to their "happy ending" were the many rules and regulations of the individual institutions (no two jails are alike), prescribing what a pen pal on the outside may or may not do. Luckily, this challenge was overcome without too much delay, and soon our ERM had a name and an address, and she started her first letter, "Dear Eddie."

(continued on page 4)

President's Ponderings

by Susan V. Rak

There's this odd moment in winter, almost at it's midpoint, where we celebrate Groundhog Day. Many people, perhaps most of the hosts on morning talk shows, will await the verdict to be delivered by Punxsutawney Phil in Pennsylvania, or Shubenacadie Sam up in Nova Scotia, or others of their kind in New York and Georgia and who knows where else. Whether or not these creatures "see" their shadow that morning tells us how much more "winter" we will experience.

And as usual, I expect it will be a mixed message. As it is with just about every other prognostication, the meaning is all up to interpretation. It will depend on where you awaken, and in what part of the country - whether the sun is shining or the morning sky is clouded. But as silly as all that Groundhog Day hoopla is, it reflects something deeply human. We want to know, with as much surety as possible, what is going to happen. Who will win the Super Bowl? How bad is it going to get in Washington? Will democracy survive? Will wars ever cease? What's next for us?

We are always like this. We want to know, and we hope that the minutiae of weather lore or a statistical study or the latest polls will provide an answer. Sometimes we'll grasp at anything that gives us a sense that we might actually be sure of something, even if we really don't believe it. Early February also brings Candlemas, a cross-quarter day that falls between the Solstice and Equinox. It is a holiday that celebrates the beginning of spring - even if the temperature is frigid or ice covers the fields. One of the ancient names for this holiday is Imbolc, which means "in the belly." And at this time of year the green and growing things are in the belly of the Great Mother, where they hide from our mundane, limited vision.

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To report a clergy death, please email board@uurmapa.org. To report a partner death, please do the same and also copy Eleanor Richardson, grandmoot@aol.com. Please send comments on any other *Elderberries* matters to editor Ann Schranz, elderberries@uurmapa.org. Ann provided several photographs for this issue.

But as if sensed by a keener and wiser sight, all the stirrings of the season of growth to come -- the quickening of life, the mystery of what is yet to be -- are there. We are in what the ancient calendar called “fallow times.” Although concern for the fecundity of the fields and the birthing of lambs are far removed from our daily cares, there is something of value to us in marking and celebrating this “fallow time.”

What has this got to do with UURMaPA, you might well ask. As I reflected on those thoughts, I reflected about how “retirement” can so easily end up being month after month of “fallow times.” And that may not be the most healthful and helpful way for us to make our way through these elder years.

It’s often recommended as we retire that we find some meaningful way to contribute to society. I will confess that for a few years that felt to me like a big “ask.” We can’t all be like Jimmy Carter, who was a great exemplar of active service to the greater good. But we can do the smaller things that are of service to our families, to our local communities and organizations.

Even as we are living through some very challenging events in our country and our world, we can turn our thoughts and hearts to a greater sense of possibility. We can cautiously shake off hibernation, to emerge from comfortable burrows and warm caves. It is a time for new beginnings.

So as we welcome another season into our lives, I encourage you to think about where “service” might lead you this year. And in particular, I draw your attention to two particular opportunities right here in UURMaPA! Please read the “Help Wanted” ads in this *Elderberries* edition and if you can, spring into a new way of supporting your community.

Yours, in the faith,

Susan Veronica Rak
(retired but not retiring!)



(continued from page 1)

Fairy godmother Beth did not know what a good match she had made. You see, in his first response to the ERM's introduction letter, Eddie wrote, "I am so happy to finally have a Unitarian Universalist pen pal! I am even more happy that you are a UU minister because I have so many questions about religion! And about sin and forgiveness, and all these things. I want to know whether there is a God or not! And whether Jesus really lived. And why God lets bad stuff happen, and much more."

This letter started a wonderful relationship between our hobby-theologian ERM and Eddie, who soon became a figurative sponge for any information or book recommendation she could give him. In the second month of their "pen-pal-ship," the state of Kentucky joined the many other states that made email correspondence an option. Whereas before that, the time between letters was 3 to 4 weeks, but now it was as little as 4 to 5 days. This is when the ERM saw that Eddie was not just passively learning, but rather asking challenging questions and making comments like many a longtime Unitarian Universalist.

Eddie has received books by Anne Lamott and John Dominic Crossan from the prison library, and is currently discussing them with our ERM. All in all, it is a very rewarding experience, and probably the really good match with Eddie helped. But this elderly retired minister is sure that many inmates who become members of the CLF, after learning about our faith tradition and after seeing and reading about how we live our First Principle, would very much like to have a "professional UU" as a pen pal.

For more detailed information, contact the ERM at reverendgabi@gmail.com or the Fairy Godmother directly. Beth Murray can be reached at the CLF where she coordinates the pen pal program. Her email is bmurray@clfu.org.

P.S.: The "Worthy Now" prison ministry is served by an ordained UU minister, paid by CLF. If being a pen pal is not your cup of tea, donations will help to continue this important ministry. Here is the link: <https://clfu.churchcenter.com/giving/to/offering>.



Church of the
Larger Fellowship

Connections Corner

by Fritz Hudson

Want to strengthen your connections with other UURMaPAns? Here are 3 opportunities:

*** Join a PEER SUPPORT ZOOM GROUP ***

Seventy UURMaPAns are now involved in 11 regular Zoom Groups. Though self-governing as to format and schedule, most groups:

- > Have 5-8 members
- > Choose a Convenor/Facilitator member
- > Meet monthly for a 90-minute session to:
 - * open and close with a reading
 - * give each member 5 minutes to share “How is it with thy Spirit?”
 - * spend the remaining time discussing a topic chosen at the prior session and choosing the next session’s topic
- > Allow participants to “depart with thanks” after 6 months or to recommit for 6 months.

To explore joining or forming a Peer Support group, email fudson@uuma.org.

*** Try Out a SPECIAL INTEREST ZOOM GROUP ***

We currently have 2 open Special Interest Groups. Learn more by contacting the Convenors directly:

- > Caregivers: Makannah Morris (revs2uu@aol.com) & Sylvia Howe (sylhowe42@gmail.com)
- > Grief Support: Duane Fickeisen (dfickeisen@uuma.org)

*** Partner with (or Become) a LOCAL AREA CONNECTOR ***

Our membership is clustered into 33 Geographical Areas. In 7 areas, Area Connectors now offer:

- > orientation to newly retired and new-to-area UURMaPAns
- > annual check-in contact with continuing Area UURMaPAns
- > support to survivors at an Area UURMaPAN's death

Check out your Area’s listing: <https://uurmapa.org/resources/#Area-Connectors>

- > If your Area has a Connector, contact them to join in their ministry.
- > If your Area has no Connector, email fudson@uuma.org to become one.

Retirement Plan Team



Gloria Guldager
Director



Jackie Toone
Employer Liaison



Anna Gehres
Specialist

Update from the UU Organizations Retirement Plan

Happy New Year from the UU Organizations Retirement Plan! Being a new tax year, when you request a new distribution or a change to an existing periodic payment in Empower, they will likely need you to complete a 2024 W-4P (for periodic payments) or 2024 W-4R (for one-time payments). We know that many ministers may retire and later return to service in a variety of ways, including interim ministry, covering sabbatical leaves, part time service, and so on. As a quick review of Retirement Plan eligibility, in all these situations, if you are working for a participating employer in the Plan, your eligibility for the Retirement Plan remains the same as always.

All W-2 employees aged 18 and older at a participating employer are eligible for salary deferrals at hire. Ministers become eligible for employer contributions upon completion of a UU ministerial internship (if not before through satisfying the year of eligibility service), and then are always eligible at hire going forward. This includes part-time and short-term service, and these employer contributions are a requirement of the employer's participation in the UU Org Retirement Plan.

When and if you work for a participating employer in any capacity, please familiarize yourself with the Employer Participation Agreement (EPA). As a minister, you may be head of staff and need to ensure that the EPA is administered correctly for yourself and other employees. What the employer has agreed to in the EPA is not a negotiable part of compensation and must be applied the same for all employees, both clergy and other staff. Sometimes a minister will try to decline contributions to save the employer money, or the employer will think they do not owe contributions for a short term or part time minister. However, our Plan is designed to provide an employer contribution for all who have satisfied the Year of Eligibility Service, regardless of the number of hours they work. These contributions are legally required and are important for providing for the future for all employees.

We send best wishes for the year ahead. Please contact us with questions.

UU Retirement Plan Team at the UUA:
Rev. Richard Nugent, Church Staff Finances Director
Gloria Guldager, Retirement Plan Director
Jackie Toone, Employer Liaison
Anna Gehres, Retirement Plan Specialist
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K

by Jade "JD" Benson

Consider things in time: your hair falls
in snips upon the floor meticulously once
each autumn. The walk does you good: you cross
another threshold and approach the chair: it is unexpected.
The smock snaps tight at your neck, the assistant sweeps.

There, in the expansive reflection ahead
you see the visage of a woman. You search
deep and long for your suitor, your love,
accessible through those eyes,
a passion shared most readily

with troubled people and your God.
It isn't easy work
loving others, loving oneself. This hour
you rest awhile in an attendant's nest
grateful for the bits of straw you pull
through conversation about the world.

Leave your womanhood
in the mirror. Here, unlike your other places,
it is only talk: Palestine, Israel, Jerusalem,
how it is that we abuse our bodies, each other
and somehow, some of us survive.



Now is the time to let someone else take care.
In proximity to others, you let go
your head, heavy, in the hands of a
beauty parlor matron. She holds it
close to her breast, caresses the hair from your face,
asks if you want the usual.

#

(first printed in *Water* by JD Benson,
a chapbook published by will to print, San Francisco, 2007)

Opportunities to Serve (Also Known as Help Wanted)

UURMaPA Historian

Are you interested in keeping our UURMaPA story up-to-date? The Historian works with other leaders to assure that important UURMaPA documents are preserved (e.g. newsletters, directories, brochures, etc., produced by the organization since its beginning in 1985). The Historian also updates UURMaPA's history so that the organization has an accurate record of its early history and progress since 1985.

Much of this is housed on the UURMaPA website. And the Historian may be asked to assist with assessing other documents for their value for historical purposes. Related to that, the Historian maintains a relationship with the Archivist at Andover-Harvard Library and ensures that selected UURMaPA papers and records are filed there, as appropriate. The Historian is appointed for a one-year term by the UURMaPA Board and reports to the Board.

A fuller description can be found on our website under "Other Officials" (<https://uurmapa.org/leadership-position-descriptions/>). If you are interested, please contact Susan Rak to apply (president@uurmapa.org).

UURMaPA Membership Coordinator

Want to help keep us all connected? The Membership Coordinator is the key to all of that! Their main responsibility is to keep membership and communication lists current and accurate. They also manage posting and use of the membership list for communications, and serve as first Administrator for the UURMaPA Announce list-serve provided through UUA.org.

A fuller description can be found on our website under "Other Officials" (<https://uurmapa.org/leadership-position-descriptions/>).

Please be advised that the UURMaPA Board is currently investigating using a database membership management system that will greatly streamline and simplify the processes described on the website job description. If you are interested, please contact Susan Rak to apply (president@uurmapa.org).



Tax Preparation and Consultation

My name is Christian Schmidt, and I am a UU minister. Seven years ago I started a tax preparation and consulting business, because like many members of the clergy, I had been confused with the bizarre clergy tax rules and had struggled to find competent tax professionals who are familiar with clergy issues. Ultimately, I decided to do the training and certification to become a tax preparer myself. I now serve more than 100 clients each year. In the next year, I want to double that number and make the tax business my full-time work.

Why would you engage my services? My clients do so for many reasons, but usually it boils down to that they either don't know how to or don't want to spend their own time and energy making sure their taxes are done properly. I work virtually, so clients can be anywhere, and I currently have clients in 23 states and DC. I work with those currently working (in parish and community settings) and with many retired clergy, as well.

If you're not seeking tax help, maybe you know someone who is — either UU clergy, those from other traditions, or those in other professions (I work with a number of self-employed people and those in health professions, for instance), so send them my way. Thank you for taking the time to read this and to consider engaging my services. You can learn more at chalicetax.com or by writing me at chalicetax@gmail.com.

In faith,

Christian



*Sharon D. Welch
and Peter Mayer
will be part of
UURMaPA's
Spring
Conference.*



Spring 2024 Conference — First News!

The Spring 2024 conference is coming soon. April 15–17, to be exact. As before, this conference will be Zoomed to your computer. Our theme inspires us to service, but in new ways: “Emergent Elderhood: Service is our Prayer.”

Although we may be restrained by our bodies, as elders, we need to find new ways to serve our communities. Where once we were leaders or organizers, but now in retirement, what roles can we play? How can we use our talents and knowledge we developed in our ministries for new organizations, new people and new ways of being? If we were lucky, we found meaning in our profession, or we found meaning in our practice of it. But now, as we emerge into Elderhood, our practice has changed or stopped, so how do we find meaning now?

The planning committee for the spring conference is pleased to announce that Sharon D. Welch will present our theme, “Emergent Elderhood: Service is our Prayer.” She is a scholar, social ethicist, author, and Affiliate Faculty member at Meadville Lombard Theological School. Here's more good news: Peter Mayer will appear during the conference and present a short concert of his music. Peter has been writing and singing his songs for more than 20 years in venues across the USA and beyond. He wrote “Blue Boat Home,” published in the hymnal supplement.

Anita Farber-Robertson will present the minister odyssey, and Joyce Gilbert will present the partner odyssey. The conference will also offer opportunities to connect more deeply in small groups. Of course, a service of remembrance honoring those we’ve lost recently is part of the conference. For this conference, we expect to have three in-person pods: One at First Unitarian Church in Wilmington DE, another at First Parish Church, Unitarian Universalist, in Kingston MA, and a third at First Unitarian Universalist Church in Columbus OH. There may be additional pods elsewhere.

Online registration will open February 1st, and the fee is \$45 per individual. Scholarships are available. For more information and program details, be sure to check the Activities page on our webpage: <https://uurmapa.org/activities>.

Watch for postings from time to time on our Facebook page, the private group “UURMaPA (Unitarian Universalist Retired Ministers and Partners Association),” as well as the open group “UURMaPA.” In addition, be sure to check your in-box for “UURMaPA-Announce” emails in the coming months.

Secrets of Ministry

by Richard Speck

Rev. Johnny Snotnose
1st UU Church
Podunk, Boondocks

In going through my papers to donate, I ran across this letter I wrote as part of a class project at Meadville/Lombard Theological School. I am both surprised and amazed at how well this letter predicted my ministry.

-- Richard Speck

Dear Johnny:

You wrote to me asking me to tell you of the secrets of my ministry. I am pleased that you think that I have something of value to share with you. Therefore, I have attempted to set down on paper the reasons for my successful ministry of the last twenty-five years.

First, you must listen to people. I don't mean just letting the words enter your ears, but truly listening. You will hear far more than just words. You will hear the pain, the anguish, the fear, the joy, the "real" person trying to communicate with you. There is no magic in being able to do this. You have to be committed to using the skills and sensitivities which you learned in CPE and internship. Be open to hearing the unspoken words as well. Sometimes it isn't what is said but what is left unsaid that provides the message.

Be flexible with your schedule. Don't get in the rut of having office hours which might not serve segments of the church. Vary them from time to time to find the periods which will make you available. But you also have to provide time for your family and personal needs. Insist upon limiting the number of nights which you spend away from home and urge your church members to do the same. This will encourage time spent with family.

Don't be afraid to fail. Try things which are risky in your services. So, they don't work every time. You may find something which really grabs the church members and starts them in a new direction. They might find a deeper way of relating together through some trial which you had the courage to include. You can learn as much from what didn't work as from what did.

Going along with this is the planning of innovative services. Include as many people as practical in the planning and performing of services. The more people who participate, the more committed they will be to the church. Many ministers fail to think that the laity have any skills or ideas about worship. They are wrong. Some of the best services which I have been privileged to lead have been created out of a mutual effort by many people. But this takes time to develop. You have to encourage the people who haven't been used to this way of participatory worship.

And don't forget the children! They are just as important. Involve them in some types of services both as participants and planners. But don't use them or try to "show off" their talents, they have a right to the same respect as you give the adults. Also, you go to them sometimes. Be with them in their activities on their "turf" doing things with them. They will appreciate the attention. Learn their names. These people shouldn't be strangers to you.

Be ready to let others take the glory in projects. This is a sign of health in a church. Your input might have been critical to the completion of a project, but by having the others receive the bulk of the credit, they will be more willing to commit time and energy to another task later. Encourage others to be successful. This will build a "team" spirit among them and allow them to work more harmoniously to build the church programs. If you insist on tooting your own horn all the time, pretty soon you might be the only sound in the orchestra.

(continued)

Avoid the “lone ranger” mentality. You are dispensable. The church got along without you before you came, and they will continue after you leave. Yes, there are things which you were called to do. But you aren’t there to keep your finger in every pie. You will only burn yourself out trying to keep up with 100 other people. You also will build a sense of dependency on you which will lessen the people’s ability to function independently. This can be damaging to a church when the minister has made himself/herself so necessary for it to function. The church falls apart when the minister leaves or dies. They need to be able to fend for themselves.

Let the people see the “real” you. Don’t try to hide your feelings or emotions. You are a human being with the same emotions as others. A person won’t trust you if they don’t have a sense of who you are. They need to see behind the mask and experience the unguarded you. With this exposure, you will be able to enter into their lives to assist them with the difficulties of living because they know that you have struggled with similar issues in your life. They will know this because they will have seen it with their own eyes.

Reach out to others when you need help. Don’t be stoic and bear your burden alone. Have colleagues who you can turn to for advice and counsel. It’s all right to not know how to react or do something. You can’t be an expert all the time. Use your friendships whom you have made through school for emotional support. Over time, you might have friends in the congregation. Utilize those friendships as well to help solve a problem with your ministry. Sometimes, just knowing another cares and will listen can be all the help you need. Other times, another might have had a similar problem, and you can benefit from their experience.

Lastly, involve yourself with an ongoing relationship with a counselor or group. This will improve your mental health during the trials and tribulations of ministry. Probe the depths of your soul to gain understanding of the things which motivate you. Through this introspection, you will come to know the real you and be able to let others see that reality. This authenticity will take you far in the ministry. It is time well spent. The counselor may help you realize the unconscious urges behind some of your more destructive behaviors. Through your reflections together, you can find the areas for growth and work toward improvement. Your congregation will appreciate the hard work in making yourself a more whole human. You can act as a model for others as well.

These then are the things which I think have contributed to my having been a successful minister. It hasn’t been easy, and I have had my fair share of scrapes and bruises. However, I wouldn’t trade my experiences for all the wealth of the world. Ministry is special to me. I got in it out of a deep-seated need to be of service to my fellow humans. I learned to help myself along the way as well. I hope that your career will be as challenging and rewarding as mine has been.

I look forward to observing you through the years and continuing our friendship. Please feel free to call on me at any time. I know that I can do the same. I hope that these brief comments have been constructive for your growth in the ministry. I felt good just reflecting on them. Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts.

Respectfully,

Richard Speck

Spiritual Awakenings

by Rosemarie C. Smurzynski

9.30.23

Mom in New York; me in New England.
Distance never blocked our affection.
Not in life, not in death.

She's in Westchester Cemetery,
embalmed, dressed in dark blue.
Dad's there, also in blue. Both ready to party.

I climbed the short hill to their grave.
"Do you like my flowers?" I ask.
"The kids are fine, the grandkids too." I report.

10.3.23

The poet prays to her muse.
Let my poem be about me
but also, about you.
Help me tell buried stories
that lead us to see
whose we are. Bit by bit
I reveal
to myself
who I am,
the whole
of which
I will never know,
at least, not yet.

10.18.23

Birds rise
performing
mid-air tricks
learned
from their mothers.
How is it done.
Can I learn.
Is it all in the wings.

I want to be this bird.
Free. Gravityless.

(continued)

11.23.23

The sky is blue,
the wind is calm.
I ought to feel joy.
Instead, despair is my companion.

Mass shootings, rifles on repeat,
Israel-Palestine- Hamas
Palestine in the middle,
caught.

Reporters: stop naming this,
“War in the Holy Land.”
Nothing holy about devastation.

There's more:
Floods.
Drought.
Cold when it ought to be hot.
Hot when it ought to be cold.

“O where, O where, is hope to be found!”
And to whom might we address our words of lament.

In Ancient Greece, they say, gods filled a jar with miseries
and evils, then closed it. Hope, a goddess, snuck in before
the jar closed. And when Pandora, a woman of great curiosity,
to whom the jar had been given, opened the jar, the curses flew
out, but so did Hope who knew on this day she would be
needed.

“O where, O where is hope!”
Walk around the pond.
See ducks gliding in still water.
Hear the children giggling, mastering moves on the slide.
Pay attention. Look.
Here, here, here, and here. . . .

(continued)

12.1.23

Write what is written in your heart. I blank.
My heart doesn't know, but it longs to know,
if only it knew how to know.

A voice calls out "Listen to Borodin, In the Steppes of Central Asia."
The way to know what heart is telling you is to detach from your
worn lists of should and ought.

All alone In the small, cozy chapel I quiet. I breathe.
I listen to trees outside swirling, to children giggling,
and to the coyote calling me to come out to play tag.

My heart is learning. Awareness
is not a stopping place.
Stop, yes. Breathe. Then, move on. ACT.



Here is a message from Kerry Mueller,
featuring her artwork --

*"They say you have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your prince.
May 2024 be a prince of years!"*

*"Though I must say, this old saw gets the words backwards.
I prefer most frogs to most princes, and I especially love this toad."*





The Shirk Ethic

by Richard S. Gilbert

O God of Work and Leisure,
Teach me to shirk upon occasion,
Not only that I may work more effectively,
But also that I may enjoy life more abundantly.
Enable me to understand that the earth
Magically continues spinning on its axis
Even when I am not tending thy vineyards.
Permit me to breathe more easily
Knowing the destiny of the race
Rests not on my shoulders alone.
Deliver me from false prophets who urge me to
"Repent and shirk no more."
I pray for thy grace on me,
Thy faithful shirker. Amen.

January 1, 2024

by Marilyn Sewell

The tree
has been carted out,
bagged in plastic,
bare of tinsel, globes of color, lights—
missing, too, the star on top,
which to be honest
was hanging on only loosely.

The creche set,
bought in Mexico
when I got off the train in El Paso
on my way to seminary
forty years ago
is all boxed up.

The tiny dark Jesus
is wrapped in tissue,
the angels no longer sing,
even the wise men
are lying low for now.

So is Christmas all done, then?
Must I sweep up
the needles from the tree,
take the wreath from the door,
go back to a world
that has as yet to be redeemed?

Surely not! Surely not!
Have we been forsaken?
I'm still expecting
the flurry of wings,
heralding
a new, a kinder day.





Incongruities

by David Bumbaugh

I am of November;
I fell in love with May.

My mind was shaped by New
England;
My heart belongs to Appalachia.

I dreamed a better world;
I never fully believed it possible.

I demanded justice;
I pleaded for mercy.

I celebrated community;
I sought solace in solitude.

I sang the fullness of life;
I spoke out of a well of emptiness.

I preached the joy of living;
I dwelt by an ocean of tears.

Each incongruity fed the other,
Each structured an inconsistent,
improbable me.

Musings on Ministry, Grief and Despair, and Scripture

by Stefanie Etzbach-Dale

01 Isaiah 54:1–2

“Sing, O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in labor! For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married,” says the Lord. “Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes.”

PART 1

At the age of 40 I was brought out of debilitating grief over all I had not been able to save or accomplish and was led to a place as unlikely as seminary. This was accomplished by a chance encounter with the first two verses of Isaiah 54. Those few words helped enlarge my vision so I could see more than just my failures; so I could see those who suffered beside me, and, the love still flowing to and through us all (appearances to the contrary). I wish I could say that I came to those verses after careful study of their placement within scripture, within verified historical events, or because a clergy person had told me they're well suited to my particular predicament. But that's not how it happened.

The truth is I was alone, felt disconnected, disheartened, exhausted, rudderless, despairing, unable to see the point in my efforts or the virtue of continued living. And in that state I grabbed a book, one of many before me - flipped it open, eyes averted, and allowed my fingers to land where they would. (I've told myself it could just have well been a novel or a cereal box. But it wasn't.) The words jumped out at me as if they were addressed to me because they were addressed to a despairing barren woman, one who had not borne children - telling her to sing! In effect, to know that she was still worthy, she was still needed because more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married woman. That was me. Of course that was me.

As I read, the hard edges between me and the book and the floor and the walls softened and dissolved. I saw and felt viscerally how narrow the tent of my perceptions had become, how much of the landscape I hadn't been able to see clearly because I had taken to hiding in that tent. An enlivening breeze surprised my skin, and only then did I realize it was because tent cords were suddenly in my hands. I was at work strengthening stakes, I was lifting the walls of the tent. Just as quickly I dropped to my knees in awe and kissed the sand. I swear I did. I heard the crunch as I fell and felt the grains on my lips.

(continued)



I dropped to my knees in awe because there was so much more to reality, so much more to possibility, than I had ever before dared to imagine! Then, just as suddenly, I was back at my desk, pained by all the familiar hard edges that had reappeared as quickly as they had earlier dissolved. It was only a book, I told myself. It could have been any book. It was a book about long ago far away devastations. It was a book scholars and theologians studied and interpreted, one associated with ancient military might and all that was lost through defeat. The people in those stories were long gone. So it wasn't personal. How could it be?

But here's the thing: I couldn't shake "the feel" of that breeze, and the shimmering light that had suddenly bounced off the ceiling canopy of that tent when I found myself strengthening its cords. My heart remembered how it had been gladdened by the array of muted colors on the wide horizon. I had never before been able to see those contours glowing in the distance because shame and grief had kept those curtains down. But now I did. I saw them. And songs urged their way up through my limbs and past my lips; songs the potency of which startled me to awakesness as if every moment before that had been a dream!

My whole body still shivered at the realization, under that raised canopy, that I was already exactly who and where I needed to be. And that I just had to widen my tent. I remembered all that. I continued to feel it. And I didn't want to stop feeling it. I didn't want to go back to the way I'd felt before. So I chose to believe the words. I chose to submit to them, however irrational that might seem to some, including to me. From then on I chose to live "as if" those words were meant for me. That choice and the act of noticing how curious and courageous and joyful it made me, changed the trajectory of my life. I know because then I went to seminary and because I am still here!

(continued)

PART 2

Decades later, I can still feel the exhilaration of discovering how much can change in an instant when we stop wishing we were different than we are. Or, when we stop wishing we were situated differently. How much can change for the better when we do whatever needs to be done to widen our tent. And let ourselves sing. They say every clergy person has only one sermon cloaked over the years in the threads of many different stories. This particular revelation is mine (though after seminary I never dared share how I came to it). These years of professional ministry have been full because, indeed, the children of the desolate are many.

I have returned to Isaiah 54 often with such gratitude but only now can I appreciate and proclaim how personal and impactful those words truly were and remain. In seminary I learned they were written to console and empower the vanquished, those who were grieving and despairing. They were written to help the defeated connect with truer, more unifying and lasting sources of motivation and pride than those imposed through the machinations of ever-changing political power holders. That's the use to which they were put after Judah was laid low. And through all the centuries since, the millennia of loss and affliction. Those words fostered a much needed resilience, a willingness among those wandering, those in all manner of exile, to stay present to life in all its complexity.

Since the Enlightenment the Western World has invested much in the idea that humanity's trajectory is one of constant improvement. The past was ignorant and barbaric; we are so much wiser and more refined. I can't help but pit all that against what we see unfolding right now, in our times. It is once again so very hard to stay present. To see the point in our efforts and the virtue of continued living. The suffering caused by those with fascist political agendas and by those with military powers is beyond horrific. So many people are desolate, scattered; even those fortunate enough to NOT be searching for their loved ones in rubble or within catalogues of collected DNA fragments. I am noticing it is not uncommon for family members or neighbors to be as strangers (or worse) to one another.

I weep for all that has been lost. For all I cannot save. And I join those who struggle to explain the WHY of all this. And especially the HOW when there is talk of peace. I am no politician. I am no historian. I am no scholar. I am not even, I admit, a theologian. I am simply one who knows grief and despair. And, the power of well-placed words of consolation. So, I take a deep breath and turn once again to Isaiah 54, attentive to whether I have allowed the cords of my tent to again become slack, the walls to close in around me, and the colors of possibility to be blocked from view.

Yes, it seems I have. I take hold of those cords once again, strengthen those stakes, and prepare to see more of whatever there is to see of this world and its sufferings and possibilities. Why? Because I chose then and choose still to believe I am always exactly who and where I need to be. And always I have the power to widen my tent and to sing.

Fall 2023 Conference Highlights

by Terence Ellen

The Fall Conference was a great success. One hundred and seventy-eight of us, including presenters, signed up, making this the most-attended conference ever. Further, ninety-seven of us sent in evaluations afterward, a high percentage, almost all of them very favorable. Such a response attests to the welcoming, engaging, inclusive tone and practice the Planning Committee aimed for.

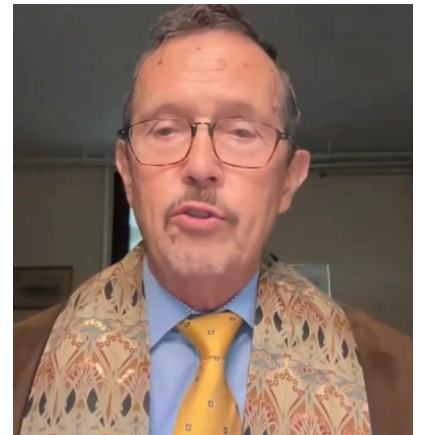
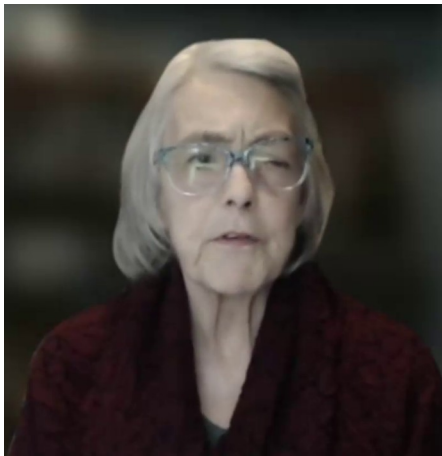
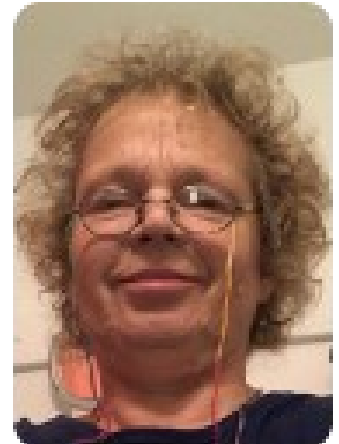
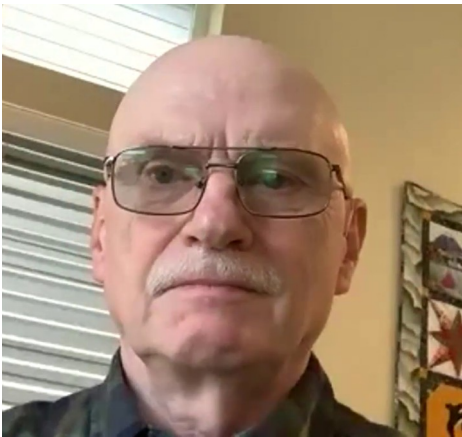
Our theme was “Blessings and Challenges: Successfully Navigating Change.” This theme cast a wide net, since we retirees are encountering change all around - in our inner lives and with our health, our interests, our relationships with family and loved ones, our professional lives, our present communities, and the wider world with its crucial challenges, to name a few. And also, with such a diverse group such as we are, in our three days we simply had programming to give some examples of lives lived in such changes and then allow us to meet in small groups of six or so to share our individual responses to how we each were navigating our own way.

We were fortunate to have three in-person gatherings, “pods,” to creatively do their own programming and blend with our online offerings. Jaco and Barbara ten Hove arranged a pod for nearly thirty people in Seabeck, Washington. Richard Speck arranged one for eight in Wilmington, Delaware. And Sylvia Howe arranged one for six in Columbus, Ohio. This allowed for some of us to gather in person and enjoy face-to-face camaraderie, adding another dimension to the conference for those who could make them. For the first time we also had a chaplain available each day. Marni Harmony, John Gilmore, and Diane Teichert each volunteered to provide a safe, caring support for our gathering.

We began each session with a slide show of pictures and names of everyone who sent them in so that we could connect names and countenances of those we did not know and greet in our hearts those we did. Jeff Briere pulled this together with a worldwide soundtrack he had carefully selected as background. We began and ended our gathering in worship services, with Lynda Sutherland, Susan Rak, Sonja Sukalski, and Barbara ten Hove providing an opening worship that acknowledged the crisis in the Mideast, lifted up the related issues of land acknowledgment for all of us, and welcomed us to this gathering of spirit. One of us wrote, “It was beautifully done. The whole experience moved me and stayed with me.”

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Many thanks to Fall 2023 Conference Planners and Participants!



Some participants from left to right, beginning at the top:
Anne Marsh, Barbro Hansson, Cathie Severance, Duane Fickeisen, Eleanor
Richardson, Gabriele Parks, Janne Eller-Isaacs, Larry Ladd, and Ned Wight

Many thanks to Fall 2023 Conference Planners and Participants!



Some conference participants from left to right, beginning at the top:



Olav Nieuwejaar, Roberta Finkelstein, Lynda Sutherland, Terence Ellen, and Susan V. Rak



Olav was introduced by support group members Carol Hepokoski, Johanna Nichols, Marni Harmony, and Jim Grant (clockwise from the top left). Olav is in the lower right photo.

We then went to our opening check-in small groups for people to share “How is it with Thy spirit?” Sonya Sukalski coordinated these three gatherings, with the support of Barbro Hansson attending to late-comers, and, of course, the wizardry of our talented tech person, Jon Claney. Each group had a facilitator who was trained in our guidelines and foci for the groups. The second gathering was specifically theme-related, and the final was an opportunity to gain closure and share take-aways from the gathering. In an effort to be more inclusive of partners, everyone had the option to be in a group of partners, ministers, or mixed. As one person put it: “It was great to hear what a diverse group of colleagues were doing to maintain focus and meaning in their lives - and to contend with physical and psychological challenges of aging in these troubled times.”

Experimentally, each of the eight program sessions ended with some online socializing of all who wanted to stay on for a bit. These gravitated to reactions to the programming before, and our facilitation improved so that people kept coming back.

The next section began with Wayne Arnason introducing the chaplain of the day and then the presenters from the UUA and UUMA. First were Sofia Betancourt and Jessica York in an open conversation between them about the UUA changes they felt were most important. Wayne then moderated a panel of UUA and UUMA staff on how they saw themselves and our ministers and congregations faithfully navigating change. Jessica York, Jan Gartner, Phillip Lund, and Melissa Carville Ziemer shared, and Richard Speck facilitated the question and answer session that followed.

The last session of the first day began with a presentation by Linda Olsen Peebles and Roberta Finkelstein on the status of a proposed new UUMA chapter of retired ministers, with Wayne moderating again. Then Charles Stephens began the Odyssey for the evening and invited Peter Richardson to introduce his wife, Eleanor Richardson, for her Odyssey, followed by questions and reactions. As one person said: “Oh my! What a fascinating life story. Everything was so interesting. What a proactive woman!” Virtual socializing followed.

(continued)



Ohio “pod” participants included, from left to right: Sylvia Howe, Paul L'Herrou, Lynda Smith, Joan VanBecelaere, Marco Belletini, Suzan McCrystal, and Holly Horn. Ben Maucere also attended.

Our second day began with Roberta Finkelstein introducing and then moderating a theme panel of four of our own numbers, two partners and two ministers, describing how they have been navigating the blessings and challenges of change in their lives. Larry Ladd and Cathie Severance spoke as partners, and Duane Fickeisen and Janne Eller-Isaacs spoke as ministers. There was time for responses from all afterwards. The presentations were deeply personal and varied. One person put it: "It was an incredibly enriching experience. I was deeply moved by their profound sharing. I thank them for their insights into the challenges and rewards of aging, in both our personal and professional lives."

Our second Tuesday session featured one of the three spotlights on a pod, followed by presentations from our UURMaPA Board on various issues and programs for us retirees. We then broke into our discussion groups to go more deeply into our theme together, inspired by the panel sharings before. Again, a response: "This was a most helpful piece of the program. The panelists were honest and clear and I was impressed with current services to our congregations."

We finished the day with our customary remembrance service for colleagues we lost this past year. Before it, we regretfully announced the death earlier that morning of Carolyn Owen-Towle, whose remembrance will be in the Spring Conference. The service was put together by Lynda Sutherland, Anne Marsh, Barbara ten Hove, Gloria Perez, John Gilmore, Richard Speck, and Terence Ellen. There were opening reflections and music followed by brief biographies of each colleague with the placing of a white rose in a vase in honor and celebration of their life.

The honorings were broken into four sections with different readers and musical interludes between each of the four to provide time for individual reflections. To maintain focus the chat was closed until after the honorings, when all were invited to share both written and spoken remembrances and appreciations. One response was "The warm and effective memorials with visuals, musical interludes, and pacing has reached some kind of pinnacle for an online service of remembrance. Very touching, heart-warming, to hear the stories of the lives of members who died this year." Afterwards, virtual socializing extended the sharing.

On Wednesday we first heard two brief UUA presentations from Keith Kron (Targeted Ministries) and Anna Gehres (retirement finances), and then heard the Odyssey of Olav Nieuwejaar, who was introduced by his UURMaPA support group. One hearer responded, "One of the most powerful and vulnerable and authentic stories I have heard in a long time. It affected me profoundly." An open time for responses followed and continued in the virtual socializing.

Our last session included our last break-out groups focussed on our take-aways from the conference. These were followed by a powerful closing worship by Ned Wight of our UURMaPA Board. It brought all of our varied Conference experiences into an integrated, emotional whole with both words and music. One respondent said, "It was the highlight of the conference for me. Superbly prepared and presented."

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Barbro Hansson then said a few “Last Things,” including the date of the Spring Conference, Monday, April 15 to Wednesday, April 17th . Although Barbro stayed in the background almost the whole time, she was the unseen presence bringing it all about by her indefatigable persistence, experience, creativity, organizational abilities, good humor, and warmth on the Planning Committee. She’ll be convening our April conference as well.

The Committee has read through all of your responsive feedback to the parts of this gathering, and are working them into the planning for the Spring Conference as best we can. There are a number of good ideas, most pronounced of which is the repeated desire for including diversity in all its forms, for example, economic differences, as we select speakers and other programming.

These conferences have evolved under Barbro and others, and with your considered feedback and the continuing support from our UURMaPA Board, will continue to evolve and try new things in order to provide a welcoming, stimulating, and heart-touching combination of pod and virtual community.

With thanks to you all,

Terence Ellen, Publicity, for the Planning Committee consisting of Barbro Hansson (Convenor), Anne Marsh (Scribe +), Richard Speck (Pod Liaison, Tech Assistant), Lynda Sutherland (Worship), Charles Stephens (Odysseys), Wayne Arnason (Chaplain Coordinator, Liaison to UUA, UUMA, and UURMaPA), Roberta Finkelstein (Theme Panel), Jeff Briere (Slide Show), Sonja Sukalski (Small Groups), and Jon Claney (Tech Professional)



Sunday Mornings and Spiritual Connections

by Carl Scovel

I've received over 20 responses to my article, "Where are you on Sunday Morning?" Colleagues wrote of their achievements, survival skills, sufferings, frustrations and their joy in living. It was a privilege to read them. Because only one clergy spouse reported, this has become a report on what clergy do in retirement, thus incomplete. I justify this with our eldest child's favorite quote, "It is what it is." Here is my report on what I have learned.

First, a few unattributed quotations.

"I spend more and more of my Sundays walking the trails in my area . . . and reading and reflecting on the lives and writings of Emerson, Thoreau, Fuller and others in the Transcendentalist movement."

"I attend a church staunchly in the Universalist tradition . . . where I have deep and deepening connections, where I find community and meaning and . . . my spirit is enriched with programs consistent with our UU heritage and vision."

"I didn't leave Unitarian Universalism. It left me."

"I marvel at my good fortune to have such spaciousness in my life, to nurture relationships and to savor the beauty of the world . . . particularly sweet after so many years of brokenness."

"My preaching has been abridged. I have been 'canceled.'" This respondent wrote that his colleagues would not invite him to preach because his previous sermons did not express sufficiently liberated viewpoints.

"I'm still with the Unitarian Universalists. If I'm not wanted, I may go to the Quakers or some other group."

"I read the obituaries in the newspaper, look at the photos, and whisper to each of them, 'Child of God; whole library of life.' This is partly for 'memento mori,' but even more to acknowledge and appreciate the gift of life of the man or woman I behold, and to reflect on the gift of my own life."

From a couple who attend two UU churches: Both report that their churches are "healthy with active children's programming, social justice work and . . . a strong, unapologetic spiritual message."

"I wondered if I could get adjusted to sitting in a pew, but I find it quite agreeable."

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And where do colleagues find spiritual support, if not from a church? One makes breakfast on Sunday morning then walks for several miles on nearby trails. One is energized physically and spiritually by the local bike club. Two find sustenance in meditation, alone or in a community, one as a Buddhist, one as a member of Rhada Soami. One retired couple observes a sabbath from Friday evening through Saturday. They began this practice while both were working and still find it “the most sustaining thing we do.” Another plays in a local band and says it is “a genuinely diverse and genuinely loving community.”

Where do our retired colleagues go to church? The following statistics are based on responses to my article plus what I have learned in conversations with eighteen colleagues who reported their own affiliations or those of other colleagues. Here is the summary:

- 25 attend non-UU churches
- 14 attend UU churches (13 of the 14 report a very good experience)
- 8 attend no church
- 2 meditate, one in a Buddhist tradition and the other in the Radha Soami tradition

The 25 who attend non-UU churches report the following affiliations:

- Episcopal: 8
- United Church of Christ: 4
- Methodist: 4
- Baptist, Christian Science, Jewish, Lutheran, Mennonite, Orthodox Church of America, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, United Church of Canada: 9 (one each)



(continued)



What does this mean? What first strikes me about the responses is how few answered. I shouldn't be surprised because I get lots of requests for responses which I ignore with a clear conscience. I credit that same reaction to those who did not respond, but it leaves me curious. After all, there are approximately 1,432 members of UURMaPA, including clergy and partners. Of that total, about 420 are partners. Some of the partners are also clergy, and some retired UU clergy may not be members of UURMAPA.

What does our own faith/religion/spirituality mean to us as former ministers or pastors of religious community? Only in retirement did I realize how much my work sucked out of me spiritually. Retirement became for me a retreat -- a time to be a lay person at worship services, a time to discover my own faith and lack of faith, a time to pray, meditate and study scripture and religious classics for my own benefit without looking for "useful" ideas and quotes. What a gift!

Maybe it was this experience that prompted me to explore whether my colleagues have experienced retirement as a spiritual opportunity. Do the responses to my inquiry reflect a similar distribution of affiliations among those who did not respond? I don't know. Are some who know that the collector of this information is a Christian more likely to respond, while others are less likely to respond? I don't know.

Four of those who go to no church and at least half of those who go to non-UU church reported unhappy experiences in UU churches. My friends in interim UU ministries tell me they had difficult ministries. Keith Kron has been reported as saying there has never been such a shortage of candidates for UU churches. Many seminary students and graduates are entering hospital, nursing home, hospice or community ministries. If this is the case, what does it mean for our future? Who, if anyone, is researching or even discussing this situation?

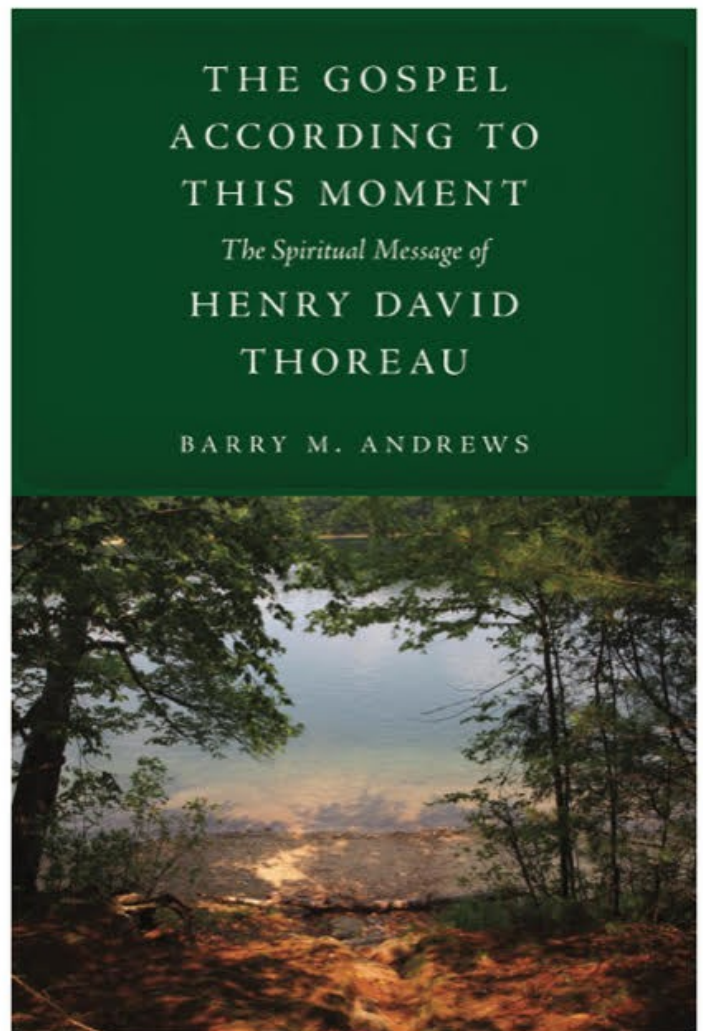
We welcome newly retired UURMaPA members

Elaine Peresluha and Marian Stewart

Book Bench --

Henry David Thoreau is best known today as a writer, naturalist, and social critic. He was also a schoolteacher, surveyor, and pencil-maker. In *The Gospel According to This Moment*, Barry M. Andrews reveals how an idiosyncratic and unconventional religious faith was central to Thoreau's many-faceted life – a dimension that has been largely unexamined.

Through close readings of his writings and a focus on his Unitarian upbringing, Harvard education, mentoring by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and immersion in ancient Eastern and Western philosophies, Andrews explores the nature of Thoreau's spiritual message, what he called the "Gospel according to this moment," which enables a flourishing and deliberate life.



"Pod" Hosting 2024

Concept

A pod is a central location where UURMaPA members may gather to participate in our virtual conference. The pod may utilize a church with appropriate audio-visual technology to allow group participation for major presentations like the keynote address and also have the capacity for small group breakouts. Alternately, a pod may use a conference center that has the capability of hosting this type of gathering. Whichever is used, it must be fully accessible for our members.

Team Leadership

Each pod should have a team of individuals to share the organization of the pod. At least two people will be responsible for the various needs to put together a successful pod. Three to four would be ideal so that all aspects are covered. One person should be sophisticated in audio-visual technology, or have access to someone to contact in the event of technical issues that may come up during the conference.

Sleeping Accommodations

Organizers using a church should consider where travelers might find sleeping arrangements. The location should be near hotels or motels with different price points. Some pods may offer a list of alternative accommodations such as Airbnb or bed and breakfast locations nearby. If using a conference center, make sure it has accessible rooms.

Meals

A pod provides food during the conference. It may provide catered meals on premises where people share the cost or provide a list of local restaurants where people can partake of differing cuisines. Coffee, tea and water should be available throughout the conference. A pod using a conference center will have the meal service provided as part of the cost of the center. Healthy snacks, such as fruit or energy bars, should also be available. A system of reimbursement for alcoholic beverages will allow those who partake to do so without burdening the cost of the pod unnecessarily.

Transportation

Some people may use public transit to travel to the pod location. The pod organizers should identify which modes of travel are convenient to get to the pod. If possible, pick up and drop off for those using public conveyances should be offered. Also, helping people travel from hotels to the church daily should be considered. An alternative is using Lyft or Uber services if they are available.

Technology

Since this is an online and in-person event, the host site should have the capability for adequate interactions with those online and in the room. Robust wireless connections for laptops and a strong, reliable internet connection for the video projector are critical. A person familiar with the host technology is required should technical issues arise. Also, sound amplification is needed for interactions between the pod and others online. This might mean a microphone for speakers who are interacting with a keynote or other presentation. There is also the possible need for assisted hearing devices for individuals.

Breakout Space

There are times for small group sessions as part of the conference. Separate rooms where smaller groups of pod participants can gather will be needed. These spaces should also have wireless connectivity. Comfortable seating will allow for a pleasant experience. Depending on the size of the pod, two to four rooms may be needed to keep the breakouts to no more than 6 individuals.

Costs

Each pod should be self-sufficient financially. Individuals may apply for scholarships to reduce the cost of registration. Each pod should develop a budget for food. The pod location may request reimbursement for the use of the space and or supplies for meals. Pod organizers should not bear the total cost of the pod. A possible solution is to ask everyone attending a pod to contribute the same amount to cover shared meals and drinks excepting alcohol. A pod at a retreat center may apply for an advance to cover the cost of making a reservation. The advance will be paid back through registrations at that site.

Publicity

Each pod will coordinate with the planning committee to publicize each pod location so that people may make choices of where to travel. Each pod should highlight the local attractions that might entice attendees to come to that pod location. One member of the pod team should be designated as the contact person to answer questions and create a list of attendees.

Health Concerns

Given that covid continues to affect our society, the pod organizers need to follow the national and local protocols concerning precautions for in-person meetings, social distancing and mask wearing. Organizers and attendees also need to follow the protocols and mandates of the specific location where the pod will be gathering. The current conditions should be communicated to any who might attend so that they can make their own health risk assessment.