

Minister's Board Report

Board Meeting—October 17th, 2022

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

Minister, North Universalist Chapel Society

There are more kids coming. Not always...and not on perfect fall days but there are more kids coming. How do we attract more? Invitation. How do we become the place where young families want to be? How are we preparing the church? How are we preparing its staff? How are we preparing the congregation? And most deeply, do we want to do this?

In order to create change, we have to change ourselves. The way we have been creating community can evolve? It must evolve. We have just been through two years of incredible change. That change is far from over but we are different now. It would be



easy to name our losses but in what ways have we gained? How have we grown over the past two years? In what ways are we supporting and nurturing that growth?

I can answer these questions but I would like the Board to consider them. Are we stronger in spirit or weaker? How would we know? What are the markers? Are we confident or anxious? Are we brave or are we fearful? How can we ask an answer these questions



faithfully? How can we embody that faith and thereby, prepare the way for invitation? Are we doing the opposite inadvertently?

What does invitation look like? It looks like beautiful you. Would the Board consider taking pictures and writing bios so that new members of the congregation and old members of the congregation know how you are? In the UU church in Springfield, MA, it is the first

thing that you see. You walk through the front doors and there they are, the shining faces of leadership.

Every church has its challenges. In Springfield, the church is located remotely. It is architecturally beautiful and VERY secluded. It is less inaccessible than North Chapel at first glance. I believe that the front door is approached only by stairs (which is a problem) but once you enter, the members of the Board are there to greet you. For anyone wondering about why the church is the way that it is, they are invited to take the next step. They know exactly how to approach.

Last Saturday, members of the Board accompanied by Denise Lyons invited me to present an update on Brave Light. After the

Board's September meeting, a letter was prepared for me (dated 27 September, 2022). I did not attend that Board meeting nor did I submit a written report. For two years, COVID presented serious challenges to the ministry of North Chapel. I chose to respond to those challenges by doubling down. I take full responsibility for my health and well being in doing so. I am doing fine and I stand firmly by my choices. After too long a time without a significant break, I took some time away to rest, to recover and to visit family. I shared with Kathy by telephone that the Brave Light Youth Exchange Project was moving forward despite many challenges.

I was surprised by the tone of the letter and by the level of anxiety in the room, anxiety that was directed at me. I invite you to reread the letter. How does the letter read to you? Is it strong in spirit or weak? How do we know? What are the markers? Is it confident or anxious? Is it brave or is it fearful? Does the Board letter prepare the way for invitation?

Months ago, David Parker resigned from the Board and resigned from the church. Before he did, he made what an offensive comment about his experience at North Chapel. His words were harsh but he stood by them. He did not childishly storm out of the room. He did not triangulate. He did not create a scandal in the congregation. He stood his ground. He subsequently attended Board meetings and remained approachable. He took responsibility for what he felt and said. When members of spiritual communities find themselves where David was, rarely are they as elegant in their

departures. David did not make his comments gently enough, but if he had, what would have unfolded?

Members of this Board reached out to David after his departure. I heard reports of his withdrawal from the Board but not from North Chapel. When I spoke with him, it was clear that he was not returning. What happened with David? What was our part in his decision? What does North Chapel lose in his absence? How could North Chapel have enabled his growth? And most deeply, how will David enable our growth?

Just before my June report to the Board, I offered a reflection called *The Ghost Pepper Papers*. It explored a denomination conflict that has been brewing in Unitarian Universalism for several years. In my June report to the Board, I suggested the following:

I would like to explore the inevitable energy of conflict in a different way. Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley has just completed a book entitled transforming CONFLICT—The Blessings of Congregational Turmoil. It sounds difficult but it's actually wonderful. Terasa is highly skilled and very wise. Terasa's work might help me/us to develop strategies of conflict resolution that are more useful than the ones that I/we have now. I want to enter this work when there is no presenting issue before us. This way, I know that I can be more playful and creative.

Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley has written a wonderful book. It opens with an introduction by Gil Rindel, the author of *Quietly Courageous—Leading the Church in a Changing World*. He writes,

This is a good book. It is an important book. That's why I have a problem. My problem is that people may not pick up this book unless they have a problem—or more specifically, a problem in the congregation.

As a lifetime inhabitant of congregations, I know the pattern. Differences both large and small, are a part of the very fabric of all congregations, of all communities. In addition, many--if not most--congregations (persons, families, communities) have experienced some level of trauma. When traumas intrude and when differences of preference, practice, or opinion rub up against one another sufficiently to create discomforting heat, the congregation turns to the leader to "fix it." When the fix is not forthcoming, the differences deepen and people feel like they have to "do something." One of the things people do at such a time is search for resources to help them with their problem. That's my problem. That is the time people will most likely pick up this book.

When we are in conflict, how do we respond as a group? What kind of response best serves a healthy and robust congregation? As a group, do we know how to lead courageously? As a team, do we know how to be brave?

In 2019, two years into my ministry at North Chapel, I had a challenging conversation with Chris Bartlett and Denise Lyons. Together, we explored the balance of my commitments and questioned the amount of time that I was devoting to what were then called the "competing interests" of my ministry—my duties here at North Chapel and the resolution of the crisis that befell the church I served in Silver Spring. That crisis produced a letter that was delivered to the Committee on Ethics and Collegiality, the judicial arm of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association (UUMA). At the time of the meeting with Chris and Denise, the value and purpose of this letter was unclear. It is basic to the spiritual experience that one wonders in the desert sometimes. We have to enter the clouds of our

unknowing. When the way is clear, very often it is not spiritual experience.

The conversation Chris, Denise and I was difficult and fruitful. It began to clarify the good way forward. It did not create that good way. It just began to clarify it. In other words, it helped to put in motion a larger conversation about courage and leadership, a larger conversation about conflict. At the time, the meaning of that conversation was confounding and rather murky. What has clarified over time is that without the UUCSS letter, without what we then referred to as a “competing interest,” I would have been able to maintain neither my faith nor my ministry. I would not have been able to serve you and I would not be able to serve Brave Light. In deepest truth and in faith, this was not a competing interest but my highest expression of our shared faith. I invite you to read this letter and discover the ways it contributes to North Chapel...because it does.

Is anxiety about North Chapel’s annual budget been placed the Brave Light Initiative? As I read the Board’s letter about Brave Light, this seems to me to be the case. A portion of the letter reads:

Also, knowing whether [the Board] can count on this supplemental funding for 2022-2023 is important to church budgetary planning, which begins in earnest in November/December.

We have already agreed that 25% of my time this year will be devoted to the Brave Light Initiative. We have agreed that 25% of my salary, therefore, will be coming from the Brave Light grants. The remaining funds raised last year will not affect North Chapel’s ABD.

Twice in the letter, the continuance of the Brave Light Initiative was cast into doubt. The first time, the letter read...

We feel grateful to the institutions and individuals who provided funding for this initiative and are mindful of the trust they showed in the North Chapel by allowing us to postpone the project and to maintain the funds. To honor that trust, we want to ensure that the project is either launched expeditiously this year or that we return the funds to our donors in a timely fashion.

We are already underway. We have no shared understanding of timeline and Brave Light is a fledgling project. We don't know what an 'expeditious launch' really looks like. We just know that if it doesn't happen, we will need to shut Brave Light down. It is unclear the degree to which I am a part of this 'we.' The second time that doubt was cast, the letter read...

Knowing that Brave Light is a challenging project to deliver on, even without COVID complications, we want to have a more concrete and detailed sense of your plans for this effort. Without assurance that the project has a good chance of success, we believe the remaining funds should be returned to the grantors by the end of 2022.

After two of planning the Children and Youth Task Force process, the raising of \$130,000, the creation of the website and the 20 months of planning, these were difficult words to read.

The same week that I received this letter, I was invited to and attended the Leadership Summit on Social Action. Members of the



Social Action Team at Woodstock Union High School put together a day-long activity that took place at the Killington Grand Hotel. The gathering was premised on a belief statement that was generated by the Association of Washington Student Leaders out west.

Why Student Voice?

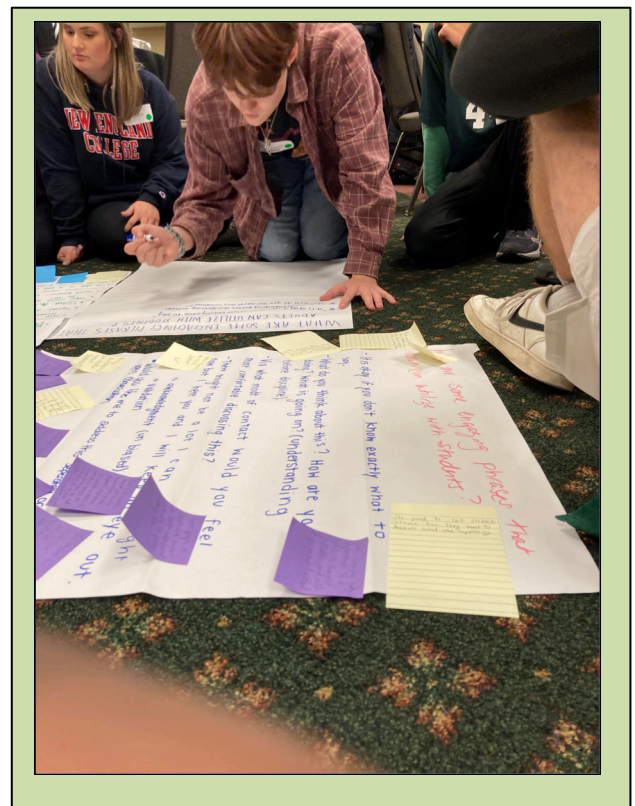
- We believe that student voice is crucial to having a successful and healthy school environment.
- We believe that students are the individuals who live the full effects of procedures, policies, and curriculum in schools.
- We believe that student voice doesn't end with a single meeting, a single group of students, or a single decision.
- Student voice must be woven into every matter in education.
- We believe that the best results in schools come from collaborative social-emotional learning.
- We believe that when students feel like they are a part of the school, they will work with the school, rather than just attend school.

- We believe students deserve a seat at the table in terms of school decision-making.
- We believe that adults in schools need to be active listeners and work to understand the knowledge that students have.
- We believe that a paradigm shift can occur with the student/adult dynamic. We are ready for an environment where students and adults can open their minds to being lifelong learners from each other.
- We believe in the power of student voice.

-The AWSL Student Voice and Equity Cohort

Students were pouring over these ideals. If North Chapel is to be of service to them, we have to be a beacon, not a bunker. We have to think about their needs as aspirations. We have to consider their future possibilities and not be distracted by the needs of our bottom line. I share this respectfully and powerfully, noting that there is no mention of the benefits of the program in the letter at any time. How do we choose away from fearful anxiety and move forward in faith? Surely, the answers to these questions will unfold for us all over time?

For a recent outdoor service, I had to ask Gina Auriema if it was ok



to bring our folding chairs outside. She said yes, of course, provided that they were appropriately returned. Apparently, this has not always been the case. The irony is this: We have an older congregation that yearns to gather safely during a time of global pandemic and there are rules in place that prevent the use of folding chairs. There are excellent reasons for these rules but they encourage a culture of saying no. I believe that this culture-of-saying-no-for-good-reason was the author of the Board's letter about the Brave Light Initiative. A culture-of-saying-no-for-good-reason doesn't attract a lot of new energy. Is this who we are and who we want to be? If we were to write our own belief statement, how would it read and what would it say?

I remember a Zoom call in which Michael Zsoldos was asking if Ken Woodhead and the Change the World Kids could use the kitchen to soup for those in need in the Woodstock area. We said no many times before we finally said yes. Do we believe that such an experience feels welcoming? Does it prepare the way for invitation? There are many challenges before us—the ongoing masking issue (which is troubled from both sides), rental challenges, healthy building use for the purpose of strengthening community, the future needs of Red Flannel Hash (perhaps the most honored of our traditions), the growth of the Spiritual Exploration program, Cabin Fever Dinners.

Will we be a bunker or a beacon? This is not a question that can be (or should be) answered by the Board. This question is best

answered by the congregation, acting in the best interests of the church.

There's a scene in a Star Trek movie wherein Captain Kirk and his team were invited back aboard the Enterprise under new leadership. It was supposed to be a media event but disaster struck—unexpectedly, as always. The Enterprise was singularly positioned to make difference. In order to save lives, the new captain had to put the ship at risk. He balked. He hesitated. He would not take on the danger. Captain Kirk said, “Risk is part of the game if

you want to sit in that chair.” Do we want to sit in the chair of spiritual leadership? What answer best serves the needs of the congregation? How shall we make best and highest use of our front door (...and our kitchen)?

