

Minister's Board Report

July 16th, 2023

Rev. Dr. Leon Dunkley

North Universalist Chapel Society



Brave Light starts tomorrow at 6:00am. I am busy preparing. This report will be very brief.

Emily Swomley, the Brave Light Registrar, had to step down last week. Her mother died on Friday, the 14th. Our hearts go out to Isabel Denham (11/25/28-7/14/23). She was a beautiful soul and a friend.

Rev. Robin Junker stepped in. She has been and is magnificent. Robin and Emily worked closely to transfer and complete the registration and health information for the Star Island trip. The book arrives tomorrow morning, before the bus. Four staff will be on the bus. Three other staffers and our two speakers will be meeting us at the dock. The packets are all prepared. Here we go!!

Sabbatical Update. I am planning a three and a half or four-month sabbatical, followed by two month-long retreats in 2024 (tentative). We have been saying that we should start this in March. It would be wisest to start in January. This is sooner than we've been talking about but the January date



would allow us to have prep time for Brave Light, as it appears to be extending over another summer.

It is difficult for me to actually speak on this coherently on the day before a major endeavor, in the aftermath of the flood, in my eighth day of recovery from the COVID that I contracted at the wedding I performed last weekend and the day before Brave Light begins. There is simply too much on my plate.



When I return, I will be meeting with Clara and MJ (as well as with the Committee on Ministry) in order to plan, not the practical aspects of Sabbatical (which is North Chapel's responsibility) but the spiritual aspects of Sabbatical. I have also reached out to Mary Katherine Morn, the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC). I will be asking for her help with Sabbatical planning as well. She would be a spectacular speaker, by the way. Plan ahead!!! Same with Rev. Dr. Sophia Betancourt, the newly elected President of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

As you may know, the root of the word sabbatical is sabbath. A sabbatical is not a vacation. It is a deeply religious act. The word "sabbatical" is commonly defined as follows:

a period of paid leave granted to a university teacher or other worker for study or travel, traditionally one year for every seven years worked: *she's away on sabbatical* | *he requested permission to take a sabbatical in Istanbul* | *he took a three-month sabbatical from his job as CEO of a family business.*

This secular definition does not describe what is real for me.

Since 2005, I have been on an intensely academic, spiritual journey. That journey has led to many fruitful places. In the next few months, I must prepare the way for a new path to come into being. I am looking for guides and I am finding them. They will advise me about the timing of the month-long segments of sacred rest.

I am not forthcoming about the amount of spiritual work I do for the ministry. I am not forthcoming about the importance of that work...the centrality of it...the core value of it. Part of what I need to do spiritually is to shift away from what my university students of color used to call “the radical privacy” of our lives and into something that is truly liberatory. That might sound lofty but it genuinely saves my life and makes meaningful the lives of many others.

I will be able to say more about that later. Over time (and with the help of Clara, MJ and the Committee on Ministry), we should develop a web page, describing the nature of the Sabbatical and how it is meaningful to North Chapel on a spiritual, ecclesiological level. The person stories are secondary to how the church will grow through this process. The webpage can answer questions like:

What Is a Sabbatical?

What Are the Sabbatical Plans?

What is the plan for Sunday Services?

And all sorts of other questions.

It is important to look at Sabbatical as a genuine opportunity. I will preach about the importance of this, the importance of taking rest

seriously. When I look at picture of myself from six years ago, the physical change is striking. Ministry takes its toll. It is so important to rest.

At General Assembly this year, I reflected on two deaths. The first death I reflected on was that of Dick Scobie (1943-2023). Mary Katherine shared the news in a public forum. Dick Scobie was the Executive Director of the Service Committee when I worked there thirty years ago. He directed the Service Committee for twenty-six years. He was a wonderful man. The second death I reflected on was that of Yeilbonzie Charles Johnson (1952-2023). Yeilbonzie was a distant mentor of mine. He was a musician, a brilliant theologian and a deeply caring soul. We both did seminary in Berkeley but we were not contemporaries and we did not know one another well.

Dick had nine years on Yeilbonzie. One of my white colleagues said, "Black ministers in our movement don't live very long because we aren't very nice to them." I thought that the statement was childish...and I also thought that it was absolutely true. As I heard this childish/true statement, the new minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Silver Spring was attacking me. She was literally red-faced with rage. She accused me of having an on-going, relationship with a member of my former congregation. Our Guidelines normally discourage this kind of thing. She said, "You have an ongoing, pastoral relationship with the incoming, Board President in Silver Spring about current church affairs!!"



It was a big deal. It ruined the last five days of the conference and it ruined the five days after it ended. When she finally found the courage to express herself directly (which she did not do for nine days), I was able to respond. I said, "I don't even know who this person is. Who is the incoming Board President in Silver Spring."

She said, "Her name is Catherine Buckler."

I sighed in recognition and I admitted to having a continuing relationship with a former congregant.

It was her Perry Mason moment. She thought that she had one the case. "So, you admit it!" she said.

"Freely," I said. "And I do not intend to stop." This happened in an official proceeding, with ministerial witnesses. This Silver Spring reverend had pulled out all of the stops. I completed my thought as I drew the proceeding to a close. "Catherine Buckler is married to a man named Bob Geiger. Bob has a brother named Kevin. Kevin lives in Pomfret, one town over from me. Kevin is the Parliamentarian at North Chapel, where I serve. When Catherine and Bob bring their daughter, Pia, to visit Uncle Kevin. They come to church. That's our faith working."

Rev. Kristen Grassel Schmidt created real and lasting hell in my life even though I had done nothing wrong. My entanglement with the dysfunction at Silver Spring ended in 2020. And yet, the drama continues. This is part of what people of color face in this movement. We are targeted and we are attacked by the very processes that are supposed to help us.

The light at the end of the tunnel is named Melissa. Rev. Melissa Carvil-Zeimer is the Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. When she learned that our processes of conflict resolution were being weaponized against ministers of color. She took action.

One of the things we are working on this summer is a long overdue revision of our Good Offices Handbook. This is the resource we use to orient and equip new Good Offices people as well as a tool to guide ongoing work in the role. Alongside the publication of

the revised Good Offices Handbook, we hope to share an easy-to-use resource about Good Offices for our members. Newer colleagues, and even those with more experience who haven't had need of Good Offices in their ministries, don't always have a clear understanding. We want to be sure all ministers in every stage understand what Good Offices can offer, why it is important to ask for support from Good Offices early and often, how to reach a Good Offices person best equipped to help in any given situation (including why it is so important to call upon a trained Good Offices person rather than a colleague friend) and what to expect from Good Offices, including with regard to confidentiality and accountability. Working on these materials will be a big part of my summer.

I read this as a gentle way of saying something that, in New Jersey, would not have been polite and would have only taken about five words.

The situation that I describe above has happened in different ways with 14 different ministers between 2016 and now. Is it racism? Not at first. At first, it is about malfeasance. In 2015, I discovered a backdoor in the church budget that allowed a former colleague to receive what appeared to be \$20,000 more in salary than the congregation was aware of. This practice went on for 8 years—from 2008 to 2016. When I got there in 2012, the process was in full stride. I didn't discover it until two years after I arrived. I blew the whistle on behalf of the congregation and in the name of ministry and every since, there has been this series of relentless attacks.

It is enough to break your heart unless you are spiritually grounded. That choice to break someone, the choice to break a person of color, that is not malfeasance. That's racism. This is what I often have to sift through before I find the audacity to say, "Good morning and good Sunday. I hope this new day finds you well."

I'm exhausted and burnt out. I am sensitive to criticism right now. So, please be gentle. I'm nervous and also very tired.

I just want to get to the Island and get this whole thing underway. I want the Brave Lighters to choose a higher path than the ones 14 of my so-called colleagues have chosen. We're better than this.