

Minister's Board Report

May 14, 2023

North Universalist Chapel Society

Good morning, everyone.

This is a very busy time. There is a lot going on. In the middle of it, there has been a lovely thing unfolding. During one of the social/racial justice forums that Joelle Seavey and I been leading, it became obvious that we are working at a deficit. In more urban areas, there is greater diversity to be found. In more rural areas, especially in northern New England, there is less diversity. This is challenging on several levels. One, we are not regularly in contact with people who are culturally different from us. For this, the issues that stimulate intercultural depth, intercultural growth and intercultural engagement are limited. Two, so often, the response to the observation that there is a lack of diversity leads to two places, two social locations:

- 1.) The Response That Corrects and Resists: "Actually, there is significant diversity in ways that are not obvious and
- 2.) The Response of Anxious Defeat: "If there were more diversity, we would all be happier and better off."

Neither response changes the number of times in a week we will hear languages other than English being spoken in a uneventful way—as in not at the concert for Ukraine, not at a "cultural" festival, etc.

Dave Cook made this observation in one of the social/racial justice sessions. His observation led to a discussion of the deep longing that many of us have. We long to find ways to reach across, to engage with cultural difference. Out of that discussion arose the playful idea of doing a service based on the song Solo Le Pido A Dios. Through the service, we could fluidly introduce the Spanish language into our habits of worship. The social/racial justice forum was not designed to canvass such an idea. We did not set out, did not intent to achieve that result. We were only interested in identifying the places within that are tender and in need of healing—even if, especially if we are not yet aware of that need.

Necessary for that discussion were trust, deep understanding and compassion enough to provide the kind of safety that we need in order to explore those parts of the human spirit that are so tender in these days, in these dangerous days—J6, Buffalo, Allen...gun violence in general, even when it is not racially motivated. This trust, this deep understanding and this compassion is engendered by several important practices at North Chapel—the ringing of the bell, the lighting of the chalice, singing, blue mugs at coffee hour (whether or not new people use them) and most importantly, nametags. Nametags are a means of saying, “You are welcome here.” Nametags provide a quiet deep breath to those who are longing for somewhere to belong. They are important in very quiet ways.

It is also important to have workshops, worship services and public discussions about what we are all going through together. Feelings of community grow stronger by going through process of conflict and recovery. The mission of the church becomes clearer. The meaning of the church becomes clearer. The principles of the church become significant and powerful. When that happens, the ‘front door’ of the church opens in a meaningful way. This prompts the interesting question: What is the ‘front door’ of the church?

The Brave Light Youth Exchange Project

Kathy Astemborski, Mary Blanton and I meet regularly to do our planning. In our last few meetings, I have become aware of a stumbling block that has been in our way. A month or so earlier, Richard Schramm and I came upon it but neither of us recognized what we were both experiencing. Somehow, the history of the Brave Light Youth Exchange Project has been lost by our institutional memory. Last month, I sent around the grant to the Canaday Foundation and Children and Youth Task Force report on which the grant application was largely based. My intention was to refresh your memory. Many were learning about the history of this Project for the first time. For this, we have been out of synch with each other. Now, we can begin to remedy that.

Brave Light is an exploration. It is an experience of discovery. It rose from an institutional concern about the experience of children and youth in our area. This is an institutional concern. It belongs to all of us. Over time,

this understanding has degraded. It is time to rediscover that. At this point, it is most useful to North Chapel for its leaders to dream Brave Light into being—less by managing the minutia of current project than by imagining its future.

The North Chapel congregation is aging. This is happening to all of us. The vitality of the church depends on our ability to attract young people. This is neither an anxiety nor an obsession but rather a healthy expectation, as one would have of a well-prepared garden. How will we gather? Not by command and power, as a function of the committee on gathering but because it is the practice of our leadership. Who will say, “I will.” What do we need to say that with confidence?

I am so eager to learn about the small-group conversations that have been happening. They have been happening, if I understand correctly, as a means of encouraging people to return to the in-person services on Sunday morning. I wonder what else is happening there. I wonder how it feels to be reached out to—not by the minister (who will not become an easy friend) but by a church (who just might). I wonder how it feels to be in the circles that you’ve created. I wonder how it feels to feel seen in the way that you are seeing...whether or not they congregants able are to participate.

What are the implications of Brave Light for North Chapel years from now? How can it help us to grow? How is it forcing us to grow?

Brave Light featured speakers have been chosen. Acceptance letters, letters of understanding and contracts go out this week. My understanding is that we have eight completed application and several more in the ‘maybe’ category. The problems that we’ve run into have to do with scheduling. We were competing against camps and vacation schedule more than we realized.

For this, we are changing the schedule and Star Island will be the first formal event. The August trip to Boston remains unchanged and the possibility of saving money to do a follow-up next summer is being explored. I have already been in touch with our major funder about this and will be sending them an update in the next two weeks. I have attached the acceptance letter.

Two last things...

First and foremost, I treasure and think the world of all of you and I could not be more honored to serve here at North Chapel. The spirit that we cultivate is maximally important for this world that is so hungry for it.

I want to explore a stimulus idea. It replaces the policy-of-limitation with an opportunities-for-growth concept. The stimulus idea has interesting implications. We could apply it broadly, from our rental policy to our SE program needs.

In closing, having just returned from the Installation of Rev. Ellen Quaadgrass and Kirsten Hunter at South Church in Portsmouth, I would like to bring Kirsten out to help us to think about how we might build our SE program moving forward.

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