

ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CONGREGATION

From the Interim Minister

May 22, 2005 (Rev. 6-2-05)

When one takes the training for Interim Ministry, five tasks are proposed for the time of transition between called ministers. These tasks are as follows:

- Carrying out the normal responsibilities of congregational ministry, including worship and pastoral care.
- Assisting the congregation in claiming and honoring its past and in healing its griefs and conflicts.
- Illuminating the congregation's unique identity, its strengths, its needs, its challenges.
- Clarifying the multiple dimensions of leadership, both ordained and lay, and aiding the congregation in navigating the shifts in leadership that accompany times of transition.
- Renewing connections with available resources, within and beyond the UUA.
- Enabling the congregation to renew its vision, strengthen its stewardship, prepare for new professional leadership, and engage its future with anticipation and zest.

As the final report of your two Interim Ministers, I would like to look at how well we have addressed these tasks.

Carrying out the normal responsibilities of congregational ministry, including worship and pastoral care.

During the past year, I would say that these needs have been met adequately. Pastoral care has been met through contact with people in crisis, memorial services, weddings, child-naming ceremonies. During an interim period, one loses the long-term knowledge that your previous minister possessed for people within the congregation. This loss cannot be replaced within the interim. But I do think that this congregation has managed to meet most of the needs of its members in this capacity.

Worship needs have not only been met, but, I believe, worship has been strengthened in quality over the past two years. This is not a reflection on the previous minister's worship abilities, but rather on addressing the intricacies of the lay-led and committee processes that are a part of this congregation. This especially became a focus of this second year of interim ministry. I have sensed a shift in the past year towards deeper understanding of the worship process – what is a service about and how to create that. Those services led by regular attendees of the Sunday Services retreat and committee meetings became stronger in these areas as the year progressed. I believe you are walking into relationship with a new minister strengthened in your own skills and more deeply appreciating the professional talents of a trained minister. Rev. Child began a process of blurring what had been hardened lines between lay and ministerial services. I continued that work in a slightly different pattern, so MUF has experienced two ways of this interaction. Closer work between the Music Director and minister and service coordinators has also enhanced the worship experience.

Much appreciation has been expressed for this last year's increased attention to the physical setting of the Meeting room for each service. During the year I have promoted the acquisition of accoutrements that will

enable this to continue – candlesticks, a chancel table, Christmas decorations and a tree, cloths, vases, chalices, etc. I hope you will make the effort to utilize them and to develop a group of people who wish to create settings that visually abet the themes of the services.

Assisting the congregation in claiming and honoring its past and in healing its griefs and conflicts.

Rev. Child did the bulk of the healing work with you. The conflicts that still exist are, I feel, the result of troubled times of the past that reduce trust in leadership's ability to propose, make, and maintain good decisions. This especially comes out at congregational meetings where lack of trust by a few members is expressed in statements that the congregation has or might be misled or that elected leadership should not make decisions without constant congregational scrutiny. The ability to elect trusted officials, to delegate to a board and committees the responsibilities for daily matters and good judgment, to believe that leadership will consult appropriate resources when making decisions and see that proper checks and balances are part of the policy of the Fellowship: these and more are not yet sure to all members. The result is more conflict than necessary and pain for those who assume responsibility then have their intent and abilities doubted. This is something the congregation needs to further address, and the trusting majority needs to re-focus the discussion during congregational meetings. The unfortunate circumstances of a board in the past need not be the story for all time. Recognizing the work that has been done to insure better checks and balances, etc, might be surfaced in preparations leading up to congregational meetings, such as in written materials and in congregational conversations. And I would recommend that the congregation engage in a process for recognizing and acquiring right relationships in its interactions.

There are still a few members who are upset over the departure of the former minister and former Director of Religious Education. They seem to be a very small number, but the congregation could set itself a goal to address them, to hear their stories, and to issue a welcome to return to the Fellowship.

Illuminating the congregation's unique identity, its strengths, its needs, its challenges.

The Fellowship seems to have grown in its concept of itself as a healthy body, a place of treasure from which a great future could spring. Over the past year, I have heard leadership express a desire to become a transformative force in both individual spiritual development and social outreach. And I have seen constant movement toward that paradigm. The changes in internal governance and the creative and hard work being done in recruiting and developing clear process for social responsibility are two indicators of such movement. You have called a minister with such an agenda and the talents to achieve it. MUF is reaching out to be a force in the community and welcoming to change within. The policies that develop within the next couple of years will determine whether the congregation can be "permission giving" to its membership – allowing creativity to blossom while yet keeping within the mission and context of the congregation. Constant assessment of whether such permission is flourishing and whether a particular policy supports this might help. I would recommend building such an assessment tool into the policy process.

Clarifying the multiple dimensions of leadership, both ordained and lay, and aiding the congregation in navigating the shifts in leadership that accompany times of transition.

For each congregation in transition there are different issues that draw attention during the interim times. In MUF, the quality of staff and staffing became a focus issue in two ways. First, the former Director of Religious Education was let go and a search brought in a dynamic newcomer. Secondly, the congregation recognized the need for more administrative staffing, voted and raised pledges to accommodate this position and began the hiring process. In both of these positions, expanded skills were sought to facilitate

and support growth in programming areas of the congregation. I especially applaud the careful planning that resulted in the vote to hire an administrator – the five year plan will take you through rough times with gentler hands. Your process was communicated to the congregation often and carefully. Leadership made themselves available for feedback. They also took steps that are a part of careful and realistic planning – asking for a defined amount of financial support, making the decision on the basis of conservative growth figures, making the job description available, and consistently backing their own decision that this was a necessary step for the health of the congregation. Exciting vision with good process.

The perception of leadership that the governance system of the congregation needed to evolve and the careful study and practice of that change have led to a much more accommodating governance system. This system will allow growth. It already allows more communication and creativity to occur. It places trust and responsibility in the hands of the committees – strengthening the grass roots of the Fellowship and rewarding the efforts of those who do the daily work. It shortens meetings of the board. Again I applaud those who attended the November leadership retreat, saw the need and responded with good and hard work at all levels of the organization. There is more left to do - particularly more guidance in the relationship of committees, sub committees and task forces to the whole of the organization, how decisions are made and communicating these paths and decisions to the congregation as a whole.

I especially applaud your leadership during the past year. These dedicated people have stepped up to the challenge of their vision, often volunteering for enlarged responsibilities during the time of transition. Many have spent considerable time in navigating this transition. What a treasure MUF has in its leadership.

Renewing connection with available resources, within and beyond the UUA.

I think this door has just been opened, not yet walked through. MUF has a few members who have served in the District and UUA, but still little congregational awareness of these resources. Most certainly during the search process and the interim ministries, the congregation has been able to see the larger denominational resources working for them. Several members have become adept at looking in the net for ideas from other congregations engaged in similar projects. Many have expressed the desire to strengthen ties within the Morristown area with those working for similar social goals. And the riches of the District are just beginning to dawn on the membership. The religious education department is expanding District offerings to youngsters and teachers. Your new minister is full of knowledge about the District and the UUA. I hope MUF will not only begin to take part in what these resources offer but also will become a leader in its offerings to other congregations. Participation in District and UUA grows with and from a sense that the larger UU movement has relevance in the world. Part of MUF's new vision is an increased sense of this. It's a seedling, but that's how great trees begin!

Enabling the congregation to renew its vision, strengthen its stewardship, prepare for new professional leadership, and engage its future with anticipation and zest.

The quality of the minister you were able to attract and call says a lot about how well you have accomplished this task. I do believe this congregation has come to a new understanding of itself as a strong home for its members and also a force for transformation in the world. Keep on taking risks under girded with good planning. Establish a Strategic Planning Committee, a widened Financial Committee, and move into intentional leadership development tools and plans. Then you cannot help but see this congregation become all you dream it could be.

Respectfully submitted,

Rev. Emmy Lou Belcher