

2021 President's Report to the General Assembly  
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## Opening Reflections

Who could have imagined what this past year would bring?

The ground has continued to shift beneath us all. It has been a traumatic year. It has also shown us the powerful truth of our interdependence. As we reflect on this past year, may we remember not just the grief, but also the ways we have shown up for each other, for our communities, and for our values.

COVID-19 not only created heartbreak through illness and incomparable loss of human life, it also laid bare and deepened long-standing injustices and inequities.

We lived through a violent insurrection and an attempt to overthrow the largest voter turnout election in U.S. history. We witnessed the persistent reality of police violence, disproportionately taking the lives of Black Americans. There have been repeated mass shootings, devastating hate crimes and xenophobic attacks against anyone perceived as “other” – Black and Indigenous people, Asian Americans and Asian Pacific Islanders, trans people, disabled people, Latinx people, and against Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, even our own UU communities.

So much has been made plain by this pandemic. This is an historic time of reckoning with endemic systems of white supremacy and colonialism. We have a generational opportunity, in our world and in our own faith community, to move policies and practices that foster the kind of just and anti-oppressive world we imagine. Now is the time to lean into our Unitarian Universalist theology and remember the values of human dignity, compassion, equity, and democracy that have always called us to action to make these real in our world.

To all our lay leaders and religious professionals, I want to thank you for how you have shown up, how you have led and loved and risked for your communities throughout this heartbreaking time. You have done this even as you have cared for children, run schools in your homes, cared for family and at-risk elders and known illness, loss, and tragedy in your lives.

To the leaders of DRUUMM (Diverse, Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries), BLUU (Black Lives of UU), TRUUSt (Transgender Religious Professional UUs Together) and EqUUal Access (a ministry by and with UUs with disabilities), I want to especially recognize your leadership and ministries this year. The impacts of the injustices and losses of these past years have fallen disproportionately on you and the communities you are a part of. Your ministries and leadership, even as you tended to your own trauma and grief, have been life-saving to countless UUs and families across our Association.

We lost dear colleagues, family members, and mentors this year. We lost powerful leaders and staff of the UUA. We remember and honor former co-Moderator, Elandria Williams; former UUA President, Rev. Gene Pickett; and UUA staff members, the Rev. David Pettee and the Rev. Dr. Hope Johnson. These visionary and pastoral leaders left an indelible mark on our faith community. Their love and power lives on – and always will – in the lives, leadership, and ministry of everyone whose life they touched.

Dear ones, we are very much in a liminal time. The vaccines are bringing so much hope! And the pandemic is not over. We pray for our siblings in India, Brazil, the Philippines, and countries around the world that are facing deadly new waves of the virus and without sufficient vaccines.

As we think about what comes next, we must remember the values and practices that helped us survive. These are the gifts we need to bring forward.

## **Core Priorities for the UUA**

As I consider this past year and look ahead to the next, there are three core priorities that will continue to guide our work at the UUA.

First, continued support for our congregations, leaders, and UUA staff in navigating the pandemic and post pandemic realities.

Second, implementing the Commission on Institutional Change's recommendations from their report, Widening the Circle of Concern.

Third, strengthening our justice leadership and organizing capacity, building on the success of UU the Vote.

## Our Pandemic/Post Pandemic Realities

Over 15 months ago, all our congregations pivoted quickly to virtual operations as the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world. We saved untold lives in our communities because of our quick efforts.

I am proud of the support the UUA has been able to offer congregations from resources to nurture vibrant communities virtually, to understanding requirements for congregations as employers, to staying abreast of the science and public health recommendations.

I want to especially acknowledge our Congregational Life Staff Team, which includes our 5 Regional Staff teams, under the leadership of Director Jessica York and our Office of Church Staff Finances team led by Rev. Richard Nugent. Together these teams did

incredible work, in close coordination, to provide the latest resources and information to help leaders navigate these unprecedented times.

Everyone on UUA staff went above and beyond in this unprecedented year. One of the best things about my job as President is the remarkable, exceptional team of people I work with at the UUA.

I am incredibly proud of our entire organization. The UUA staff came together in powerful ways throughout the pandemic. They shifted their work as the pandemic demanded. They kept our mission of equipping congregations, supporting leaders, and advancing UU values at the forefront. They offered support across teams, volunteering to fill in gaps. They brought creativity and excitement to implementing the Commission on Institutional Change's recommendations. And they all held care for each other as human beings as a central ethos.

We are now in an "in-between" time, one that presents new challenges, especially for leaders. Each person and family will have different levels of risk and risk tolerance. In the U.S., vaccine hesitancy and challenges of access could undermine progress toward herd immunity. Many of us have young children who are not yet vaccine eligible. As leaders, we have to navigate complex decisions taking into account care for the whole of our communities.

Going forward, the UUA recommends congregations plan for multi-platform ministry – a combination of in-person and online opportunities – for sustained accessibility. Additionally, we recommend going slow, prioritizing inclusion, rooting your decisions in the specific needs and risks in your community, and remaining flexible, knowing that circumstances could change. We do this to keep ourselves safe and to prioritize the safety and well-being of our neighbors and wider community.

At the UUA, we are following this advice as well, seeking input and discernment from our staff and creating flexible plans that allow for a slow return to in-person work while maintaining the accessibility of working virtually. We are also turning our attention to supporting resources for multiplatform events from the UUA. This includes planning for multiplatform accessibility for next General Assembly 2022 in Portland!

### Implementation of the Commission on Institutional Change Recommendations

The second most critical priority for our work, and one that will drive our efforts for the next several years, is implementing the recommendations that the Commission on Institutional Change (CoIC) presented in their report Widening the Circle of Concern.

Across the UUA ecosystem, people are engaging with the CoIC recommendations. And this engagement involves creating new initiatives, retooling core work, and weaving the foundational call of the report – living into our liberating, anti-racist, anti-oppressive,

multicultural aspirations - into the systemic and cultural practices of our Association, congregations, and UU organization.

There is more information about the UUA's multi-year implementation plan in the separate CoIC Implementation Mission Alignment Team (CIMAT) Report. And I am excited to highlight a few initiatives already underway.

The UUA Board of Trustees is embarking on a wholesale review of the UUA bylaws to make governance of our Association more agile, clear, and effective. As the Commission's report names, our current governance system is overly complex and confusing. It is rooted in mistrust of authority and draws vital resources to outdated and constraining structures in ways that undermine mission, innovation, and impact.

The report also challenges us to ask foundational theological questions about who we are as a faith community. The Article II Study Commission is in full swing to engage all our congregations in reviewing and renewing Article II of the UUA bylaws. These are the bylaws that include our shared UUA covenant, principles, core values, and purpose.

With respect to Religious Professionals, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee is beginning a multiyear initiative focused on widening pathways to ministry to address long existing obstacles of race, gender identity, class, and disability in seeking credentialed UU ministry.

The UUA staff, and in particular the Congregational Life Department, is engaged in new initiatives to support lay leaders by retooling leadership training and creating networks of lay leaders, including circles for BIPOC lay leaders. One of the most exciting events this year was the New Day Rising Conference. Over 1,200 UUs participated in this conference dedicated to congregations doing active anti-oppression, anti-racism, and dismantling white supremacy culture work. All of these efforts are having a secondary effect of strengthening the covenantal relationships between congregations.

We continue to see significant rates of conflict in congregations impacting religious professionals and lay leaders of color. While the number of situations this year is less than the incidents we observed in 2019, they continue to be concerning. The UUA is launching a dedicated Conflict Engagement Team, called *Hope for Us*, named for the Rev. Hope Johnson who was instrumental in the vision and formation of the team. This team will help congregations and their leaders engage conflict productively with opportunities for positive transformation. This group will bring skills for understanding how race, gender, identity, and power impact conflict and will create tools to help leaders intervene sooner in conflicts before they escalate.

We are also making new investments in youth and young adult ministry responding to the GA 2020 Responsive Resolution, "Supporting and Investing In Youth and Young Adults in Unitarian Universalism." This Spring, our Lifespan Faith Engagement office organized a Youth Ministry Visioning week with youth, youth advisors, and UUA staff to align our theology, approach, and communication of our offerings both nationally and

regionally. We are also sponsoring a new national youth ministry network called YUUP - the Young Unitarian Universalist Project. YUUP is a youth-led ministry, supported by adults from multiple regions.

We expanded our annual young adult GROW program this year to have two large cohorts. The Grounded and Resilient Organizers' Workshop (GROW) builds skills, deepens leadership, and uplifts the spirits of young adult activists. In the Pacific Northwest Region, we have invested in an Emerging Adult Task Force helping craft ministries for and by Unitarian Universalists after their high school years. These ministries include online small group community spaces and pastoral care.

We are also bringing a stronger lens of equity, accountability, and strategy to our publications and communication works. One example is the recent edition of *UU World* focused on Building Democracy, the ravages of the pandemic, poverty, and policing that undermine democracy, and how UUs have been responding. Additionally, Skinner House Books, one of the UUA's two publishing houses, created an Equity and Accountability Panel. The panel will support Skinner and its authors in publishing books that promote justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, including books that center Black, Indigenous, and people of color in UU history and theology.

Alongside the UUA, Beacon Press integrated the focus on dismantling white supremacy in their publishing efforts. Their historic list of Black, Indigenous, and people of color authors are shaping vital national conversations on race and equity. This has also resulted in the two most successful years in Beacon's history. And for the first time ever, Beacon is able to give back to the UUA and make an investment in our work! Together the UUA and Beacon are discovering the ways our work and mission support and benefit each other. More information about Beacon Press' impact this year can be found in the Beacon Press report from Director Helene Atwan and Associate Director Gayatri Patnaik.

Sustaining culture change within the UUA as a workplace is essential to being an organization where people of all identities can thrive. We continue to follow our updated hiring policies and are creating better practices to recruit and sustain a diverse, exceptionally talented staff. Two years ago, I reported that the senior leadership of the UUA had increased in diversity from 12% to 42%, with the overall UUA staff growing in diversity from 19% to 28% people of color.

This year, we made organizational changes to create a smaller executive advisory team to work with the President and Executive Vice President, Carey McDonald, and a larger Staff Group Directors team to broaden collaboration in decision making particularly around issues that most impact staff. The goal is to further break down silos and strengthen practices of equity and diversity across the entire workplace culture. I am pleased to report that our senior Executive Advisory team is 66% people of color and our overall staff has grown to 32% people of color. The Staff Group Directors Council of senior managers is 40% people of color.

We continue to invest in the ongoing learning and skill development of staff. We are launching the second phase of our cross-staff JEDI team (which stands for Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion), and we have just completed our second cultural assessment with UUA staff.

As we live into the recommendations of the Commission on Institutional Change, there are also efforts that are still in discernment that will roll out over the next couple of years. This includes calls for greater investment in theological education and scholarships for developing religious professionals and lay leaders. In addition to fundraising, this effort involves bringing an equity lens to existing grantmaking. This is necessary to create funding channels that will, over the long term, sustain and support our commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. One place we have started is to have conversations within our grantmaking staff and with some of our donors about decolonizing philanthropy. This is a framework borrowed from the work of Edgar Villanueva and his book Decolonizing Wealth. This is an effort to get at the foundation of our culture around giving and grantmaking.

### Strengthening our Prophetic Organizing Capacity

Our third core priority is a focus on strengthening our justice leadership and prophetic organizing capacity.

In a year when our democracy was under unprecedented attack, let's take a moment and celebrate how powerful UU the Vote was!!

Let's look at the numbers:

Over 5,000 volunteers and over 450 congregations participated! We registered over 10,000 new voters, sent over one million texts, over one million postcards, and made over 600,000 phone calls. All told, we contacted over 3 million voters!! And the high-level investments we made in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, and Georgia not only helped voter participation, it helped protect the vote and make sure every vote counted!

I am grateful for the leadership of Rev. Ashley Horan, the UUA's Organizing and Strategy Director, and Nicole Pressley, the National UU the Vote Organizer. Nicole Pressley took this nascent vision and built it – together with the Organizing Strategy Team and the UU the Vote staff and volunteers – into this spiritually grounded, leaderful effort, organized for impact. UU the Vote's success was also a reflection of the strong collaboration between the UU the Vote team, the Communications Department, the Stewardship and Development Department, and the Office of the President.

The impact of UU the Vote, an innovative ministry unlike any we have led before, went far beyond the numbers.

It includes the capacity we built, both locally and nationally, for justice organizing deeply rooted in partnership with directly impacted communities.

Through this campaign, we brought two vital resources to our grassroots partners: technology and people. The funding of UU the Vote helped provide auto-dialers to reach thousands of people quickly. We also brought the resource of people, volunteers, to boost the impact of text banks, mailings, and phonebanks.

The impact includes leadership development that was built in our congregations, through organizing school, and in partnership with our State Actions Networks. We trained hundreds of UUs at our online organizing school and will build on this model in the future.

UU the Vote also garnered national attention, including being recognized as a finalist by Fast Company's World Changing Ideas Award for Enduring Impact!

I am grateful that we have been able to keep some of the increased investment and staff that we built for UU the Vote to continue growing our organizing skills and power. We are talking all of what learned, all the ways we grew, and continuing to build for the democracy we deserve and the policies we need for all people to be free and flourish.

Finally, UU the Vote had a powerful spiritual impact. In a brutal year, beset with loss, UU the Vote was a lifeline to many. It nurtured the kind of joy and hope that grows from struggle and solidarity - and that in itself was life-saving.

## **Closing Remarks**

One of the most profound lessons of this pandemic is that we hold each other's lives in our hands.

The coronavirus thrived where individual freedom took precedence over the well-being of others. It thrived along the deep-seated racism and poverty that have long defiled our social bonds. It made the reality of our interdependence undeniable.

As Unitarian Universalists, we believe in our fundamental interdependence. It is this interconnectedness that has led us throughout our history to engage in the work of justice. We know we belong to each other and to a vision of a world where all can thrive. Our Universalist ancestors called it the Kingdom of God. Today, we call it the Beloved Community.

Covenant is central to Beloved Community. It is how we articulate the highest aspirations we have for ourselves, humanity, and our world. And no, we don't live our aspirations perfectly. We never will. That is why our best covenants address how we repair relationships after we have hurt one another and broken our promises.

Covenant is not a burden, but an incomparable gift. A gift reflected in our capacity to love and to create enduring friendships. It is why we find hope and strength through solidarity. It is how we can feel so deeply held by religious community and changed by its presence in our lives.

None of us can fully imagine the future, but this we know. What we knew as normal – the status quo – was already deadly. We cannot go back. The life-saving practices that helped us survive are what we need to bring forward.

We have long known that models of religious life steeped in individualism, exceptionalism, scarcity, and competition do not meet the spiritual needs of this time.

This year, we pulled together, leaning into our relationships as a covenantal faith. Congregations partnered in unprecedented ways, sharing resources, worship, learning together, sharing staff, and even merging communities to better live their mission.

We centered compassion, collective care, and mutuality. We offered tools for resilience, ritual and embodied practice, liberating theology, and religious community rooted in belonging and prophetic power.

And we learned even more about living our faith bravely and publicly, lessons of organizing in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives, mobilizing to go all in to defend democracy, and opening our sacred buildings to save lives.

This is no time for a casual faith. This is a time for audacious love that is inextricably linked to courageous action.

And this is no time to go it alone. We belong to each other, and we need one another to survive. Covenant – honoring our interconnectedness, creating more intentional and ever-widening practices of belonging - this is how we survive.

In this unimaginably difficult year, we have come to more deeply understand the gift of being a covenantal faith.

I remain incredibly grateful for this faith and for the honor of serving as your President. Thank you, to all of you, for the ways you continue to say yes to this life-affirming, life-saving, compassionate, and prophetic faith.