

May 9, 2021

Regional Lead Report to the MidAmerica Regional Business Meeting

Back in the fall of this year, I heard a church consultant say that the COVID-19 pandemic has taken 10 years of church adaptation and evolution and compressed them into a single year. At first I thought it was a little overstated, but as we have progressed and we have seen the transformations within our congregations, I have come to believe that this is true. True not only for our congregations, but also for the MidAmerica Region and its Staff.



I first want to celebrate the work of the staff this year. Figuring out how to fulfill our mission and purpose without being able to be in-person for the MidAmerica Region has manifested as learning how to do our work of consulting with and coaching congregations and their leaders, providing programming, building connections, and responding to crises all without being able to travel. I want to thank all of the congregations who worked with us to allow us to continue to be supportive even when we could not come to be physically present with you. As our congregations, our nation, and the world move out of this pandemic into a new world, it is clear that one of the things that will change for the MidAmerica Region is that we will provide more support for congregations digitally than we had done before, allowing us to economize on the pre-pandemic level of travel for our staff. This does not mean that we will not come to be with congregations in-person when we can, only we expect to do work digitally with congregations to see if being in-person is necessary. I want to thank the entire MidAmerica Regional Staff for their willingness and ability to, in essence, learn a new way of doing our work during this time, one that will likely continue.

One of the adaptations we made during this past year was to emphasize convening leaders and Religious Professionals from congregations with one another, to share with each other and learn together. We have heard back from those who have been part of these convening groups that these are rich, shared experiences, and we plan to continue them. Throughout this year, the Rev. Sharon

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Dittmar has coordinated our staff in convening our congregations based on role, leadership position, congregational size, and so much more. We believe that congregations can learn as much or more from each other as from us, and so helping to convene these learning communities has been and will continue to be central to our work.

Another adaption this year was the development of the Extended Leadership Experience (ELE) of MidWest Leadership School. Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley envisioned, crafted, and led our staff team in presenting two iterations of ELE during this church-year, with over 110 congregational leaders exploring congregational systems theory, dismantling white supremacy, mission and vision, conflict transformation, covenant, UU History through a multi-cultural lens, and so much more. What began as a response to the MWLS in-person school not being able to be held last summer has transformed our thinking about how to bring congregational leadership development to congregations and will inform the development of MWLS and other leadership schools for years to come.



We continue to benefit from the shared staffing partnership with the Southern Region of the UUA, including the support for the Faith Development professionals and programs of our congregations by our Youth Ministry Specialist and Congregational Life Consultant, Cameron Young, Masters Level Credentialed Religious Educator Nancy Combs-Morgan, and the wonderful Event Coordination gifts of Kathy Charles. Beyond the consultation with Religious Education Professionals and lay-leaders, both Nancy and Cameron have worked in partnership with many other Religious Professionals within and beyond our congregations to present programs like “VirtUUally”, which was a multi-event Youth Ministry Connection Series that brought youth across our congregations together, grounded in UU theology, values, and spiritual deepening. I also want to celebrate the New, Newer Virtual DRE Webinar Series, which consisted of three programming events for Religious Educators who were learning how to support congregational faith development programming during this time of COVID-19. Nancy also worked with Rev. Claudia Jiménez to present a 4-part series arising from the Commission on Institutional Change Report as a Group Spiritual Direction Experience, in partnership with the SELREDA Chapter. And, as Nancy and Cameron are both shared staff with the Southern Region, this is in addition to their offerings in the South.

Our staff also participated in the most successful cross-regional event to date, the National New Day Rising Conference, which brought over 1300 Unitarian Universalists from across the country together to talk and learn about how to dismantle systems of white supremacy within our congregations, and to learn from the examples of congregations that are actively doing this work. The stories of several MidAmerica congregations were featured in this event, and while our whole staff was involved, I want to celebrate the work of Andrew Zallar, Gretchen Ohmann, and Kathy Charles in making this event a success. Their support of the Central East Region's hosting of this event was an important part of making our first major national cross-regional event a resounding success.



Which led to their support in making another event a success, the Breaking Covenant national online workshop in April. Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley led a cross-regional team to present a program on learning how to engage disruptive behavior, conflict, aggression, and other non-covenantal behavior in congregations. At 275 attendees, the program was "sold out" and was a profound experience for all who attended.

Just as Rev. Sharon Dittmar led a cross-regional team, in partnership with Stewardship for Us, a UU stewardship consulting firm, to present a 2-workshop series in February on effective pledge drives and asking for contributions. Each of these programs drew over 245 registrations nationally and deepened our partnership with Stewardship for Us.

Sharon also coordinated with Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson, the minister of our congregation in Rockford IL, to present a workshop offering Practical Advice about Copyright for Worship, that drew 263 registrations and is seeing even more activity since the recording of it has been made available. This workshop came about because Sharon was meeting with Matthew about other things, saw the depth of his knowledge on the issue of Copyright for worship, and asked him if he was open to sharing that experience with others. Sharon and our administrative team did the work to get Matthew a platform, and the result was a wonderful workshop for our congregations.

In a similar way Rev. Phil Lund found a program created by the Royal Society of the Arts in London, called the Future Change Framework,

on how organizations can utilize a process of intentional discernment to look at how they are going to come out of this time of pandemic... keeping the changes that are useful, letting go of the changes that were just for these times, re-starting the things that they could not do but need to continue, and letting go of the things that they stopped doing that they do not need to continue. Over 70 registered and attended this program that really presented a conceptual model on how to think about re-opening... with our presenters for the program coming to us from London. We are now exploring whether this offering would also make a good national program.

I also want to celebrate the 8 webinars hosted by Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley and myself on what questions our congregations need to be asking in exploring when and under what conditions should our congregations “re-open” to in-person and multi-platform congregational life. The workshops helped over 250 congregational leaders explore the complexity of returning to in-person church community while maintaining the inclusivity of digital religious community and valuing the well being of all of a congregation’s membership. Each of our congregations has a different experience, and so “re-opening” will look different in every setting, and so Lisa and I focused on helping congregations to explore the questions through science and alignment with our values.



All of these programs (and much more that I am not naming, we have had more than 120 programs, offerings, or connection opportunities this year so far) come on top of our regular programming and connection opportunities that the MidAmerica staff offers to our congregations. From the weekly Congregational Leaders Check-ins hosted by Lisa Presley and other members of the staff, to the bi-monthly Small Congregation’s check-ins hosted by Phil Lund. From the check-in conversations at each of the four congregational size cohorts (designed differently for Large, Program, Pastoral, and Small congregations), to the large congregation staff gatherings we did in the fall for all the different church staff roles of large congregations, are staff are often in the convening role of bringing leaders and professional staff together to share with one another and learn from each other.

I could spend at least five or six more pages discussing and describing all the programming and offerings our staff has presented

this year, but I want to close by saying that all of these events, be they leader check-ins or national level events for hundreds (or thousands) of UU's, all take the dedication and support of the Region's Finance and Administration Manager, Andrew Zallar, the Technology Coordinator, Gretchen Ohmann, and the Event Planner, Kathy Charles. From managing registration and finances for an event, to setting up the technical and platform support, to planning and communicating about the event, to coordinating with the presenters, to ensuring that presenters are compensated (when outside our staff) to coordinating for the advertising across all five Regions, to calendaring to ensure our events are not conflicting with the rest of the movement, to ensuring that programming is available after the event, to, to, to, to... None of the excellent programming that the MidAmerica Region has been offering in the last year would be possible without the work, partnership, and support of the MidAmerica Region Administrators. And they do not get recognized and celebrated enough for their work that makes the most visible part of our Region possible.



And... what I am really aware of is the amazing programming that our staff is currently developing for next year, to include a revitalized Large Church Staff Conference, a new round of Extended Leadership Experiences, exploring online circle process for congregations, and so much more.

While I have focused on programming in this report, there were two other things I wished to share. The first was that this year we were able to integrate all of the MidAmerica staff fully into the UUA, as well as work to build a more unified staff team. This means now that all of our staff are employed by the UUA, working in the MidAmerica Region in support of the congregations of our region, rather than some being employed by the UUA and others not. This has led not only to increased efficiency and access for our staff, but also helped to dismantle a division in the staff between those whose work is more program focused and those whose work is more administrative focused. We are now working together as one unified staff team and finding that the lines between programming and administration are not as clear as they might have once seemed. And in that, we are seeing increased coordination and creativity amongst our staff.

Lastly, we have also seen a transformation in the consultation and coaching work with congregations that is at the center of the work of

the MidAmerica Region, but not always as easy to see as the programming the Region develops and presents for congregations. While there have been many positives coming from this time of adaptation for our congregations, times of adaptation can be difficult. We continue to see an increase in congregational conflicts, many with roots in systemic cultural oppression and white supremacy culture. Beginning any work of healing often means bringing to the forefront harms that have long been part of a community or system but have been unable to be addressed because they were hidden. As we grow in our awareness of the ways we have not been welcoming to all, of the ways in which our congregations have replicated many of the harms built into American society, we have seen an increase in congregational conflict, transitions of religious professionals, and systemic injustices being named and addressed. This work is difficult, and not meant to be easy. It can make many uncomfortable and wishing for a time when we went back to leaving these harms unacknowledged and unaddressed.



What I want to acknowledge is the amazing courage I have seen among many of our congregational leaders and religious professionals to not only bring to the forefront these difficult aspects of who we are, but to address them with courage and seek transformation of our communities from them. We have a generational opportunity to move towards being a more just, equitable, and truly welcoming faith tradition, but only if we are willing to remain in the discomfort with courage. To hear difficult stories and experiences not as accusations but as challenges for our own growth and transformation. I am encouraged by the faithful work I have seen in many congregations, and both myself and the Regional Staff look forward to journeying with you and your congregations on this journey to a world, and a faith tradition made whole.

Yours in faith,



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