

March 21, 2022

## Regional Lead Report to the MidAmerica Regional Business Meeting

When I became the Regional Lead for the MidAmerica Region of the UUA in September of 2019, I could not have imagined the adaptations that would need to happen in the functioning of and the practice by the staff of your MidAmerica Region of the UUA. Just as I could not have imagined the transitions that have happened for our congregations and communities through this time of pandemic and the rise of authoritarianism within the world. Such times are beyond imagining until you are living them, I think.



Rather than begin this report by highlighting the work of the MidAmerica Region's Staff and Leadership, I would like to begin with a reflection on the work of our congregations. I said in last year's report that the pandemic required our congregations to take ten years of adaptation and to condense them into just a few short years. What I did not say was the amount of grace, fortitude and commitment that transformation has required of all of us. From moving church communities fully online, to being back in person, then returning to being online, and now moving into creating true multi-platform religious community, our congregations and covenanting communities have made transformations no one could have imagined a few years ago.

Through all of this it is understandable that many of our congregations feel a sense of dislocation at the moment. It is taking people awhile to return to in-person church experiences... let's face it, there is a lot to be said for attending worship from your own home. But people are returning, often for the more social interactions first. Many of our congregations have had their membership numbers increase among those who engage digitally and have longer-term members remain financially and missionally committed to their congregations and to Unitarian Universalism. If anything, the challenge before us right now is that the reinvention of church multiple times these last few years has led to exhaustion among our congregational leaders and religious

professionals, just as many congregational members are ready to come back into their church communities ready to transform the world.

If I have a wish for us all, it is to catch our breath. To slow down a bit. To see who has not yet caught up, and to await them. To reach out to one another, and to be intentional about rebuilding what binds each to all.

The week I am writing this report, your MidAmerica Regional Staff is coming together for our first in-person staff retreat since the beginning of the pandemic. When we were planning the schedule for the retreat, there were many things that we could have talked about with one another, and we did pick a few of those topics of conversation. But the priority of this time of returning has to be reconnecting with one another. Mending back our relationships after two years of being only connected through the digital ether. Rebuilding the foundation from which we as a team can best serve all the congregations of the MidAmerica Region. Just as I hope our congregations will pay attention to the foundations of the relationships within your religious communities.



Last year, the MidAmerica Staff focused on two things... first, bringing programming to our congregations that related to the transitions around the pandemic. Secondly, we focused last year on building connections between lay-leaders and religious professionals of similar sized churches.

This year, the MidAmerica Staff needed to shift our focus again to respond to a greater need for more direct consultation support for congregations. There has been a significant increase in the number of congregations that have been experiencing ministerial and other staff transitions in the last year, and we expect that trend will continue into the coming two years at least. This means that much of the time of the Large, Program, and Pastoral sized congregation Primary Contact Consultants on the MidAmerica Staff (myself, Rev. Sharon Dittmar, and Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley respectively), along with the Transitions Program Manager Christine Purcell, have made a priority this year of supporting congregations through these staff transitions and ministerial searches.

As the pandemic has adapted and changed, so too did we find this year that the support congregations needed became more individualized,

based on specific situations and conditions in a local community. As such, through the year the UUA and the MidAmerica Region have moved away from providing broad-scope trainings and guidance, and more into direct consultation with congregations on their own specific needs and adaptations. In particular, I would like to highlight Rev. Phil Lund, our Primary Contact for Small sized congregations, for several innovative programs, including one that is providing a monthly sermon-series for small congregations from members of the MidAmerica Regional Staff.

I also would highlight the work that Rev. Phil Lund and Nancy Combs-Morgan (the Master's Level Credentialed Religious Educator on the MidAmerica Staff) to take the long-running Congregation Based Spiritual Direction Certificate Program and not only move it fully online, but to develop a cohort for Young Adults as a part of the program. This experimental year has been a profound success, that we will be exploring how to continue as a regular part of the program in future years.



The pandemic has led to some difficult choices for the MidAmerica Staff as well. One of those decisions that I made in the Fall of 2021 was to say that the MidWest Leadership School, in the form of an in-person week-long leadership retreat, was no longer sustainable as a program of the MidAmerica Region. After the school had to be cancelled two years in a row due to the pandemic, the MidAmerica Staff and I concluded that the in-person nature of the school significantly limited the ability of people to attend, particularly those who did not have the financial or temporal resources attending in-person required. The success of last year's Extended Leadership Experience, led by Rev. Dr. Lisa Presley and the rest of the MidAmerica Staff, have led both the MidAmerica Staff and the staff of the other Regions into exploring new models of leadership schools that blend both in-person experiences with well-designed online learning environments.

And yet, we know what a profound experience the MidWest Leadership School has been for so many, both those who were graduates of the program and those who served on faculty and staff, and we want to honor that history. In the coming months there will be opportunities to honor that history, and to provide input into the next iteration of leadership experiences in the MidAmerica Region.

This year, we will be hosting the first ever MidAmerica Regional Assembly that is designed from the ground up as a digital event. Two years ago, we transitioned a fully planned in-person Regional Assembly into a digital event with only a few short weeks' notice. This year, we have designed an event fully intended to be an online event. Our Staff helped create several previous online events, including New Day Rising and Compass, and all of those learnings have gone into developing this year's Regional Assembly. I want to thank the MidAmerica Region's Technology Coordinator, Gretchen Ohmann, the MidAmerica Region's Events Coordinator Kathy Charles, the MidAmerica Region's Finance and Administration Manager Andrew Zallar, and the Regional Assembly Project Manager Rev. Sharon Dittmar for all their work making this first of its kind event a success... which is a bit of prophesy on my part, but one I am more than comfortable making.



I also want to highlight one of my favorite parts of this past year for the MidAmerica Region, and that was serving as the Internship Supervisor for Cameron Young, as they completed an 18-month seminary praxis and ministerial internship program as a part of their work with both the MidAmerica and Southern Regions. As far as I have been able to tell, this was the first time someone was able to successfully complete a ministerial internship as a part of the UUA's Congregational Life Staff, and I am grateful to the UUA's Ministerial Fellowship Committee for allowing us to do this work together. Cameron's focus on learning had an effect on the whole MidAmerica Team and was a part of a resurgence of learning and professional development for the MidAmerica Team this year. I am grateful for the depth of relationship that Cameron and I shared over the year and a half of their development more fully as a minister and as a congregational life consultant.

One of the professional development commitments that the MidAmerica Staff embarked on this year was to have multiple members of our staff team take the University of Wisconsin's "Foundations of Online Teaching" course. This is the same course that University professors around the country take to become certified in teaching in a digital environment. We are now exploring how this will help us to create better digital learning experiences for congregational leaders and religious professionals in the years to come. One of the highlights for me from the course was a growing awareness of all the ways that my teaching styles, both in-person and online, were manifestations of white

supremacy cultural conceptions about learning that I was completely unaware I carried within me. I am doing some internal work to shift away from being the “sage on the stage” and towards being the “guide on the side.”

I also want to highlight the work of the MidAmerica Board of Trustees in the last year, and in particular the depth of their engagement with the report of the Commission on Institutional Change titled “Widening the Circle”. Your MidAmerica Board spent most of a year studying that report, and in particular identifying the areas of the report that were focused on some of the inequities that come from the differences in the regional structures of the UUA. Your Board also took to heart the section of the report on Reparations, and will be announcing some new programs, funded through the MidAmerica Investment Account within the UUA Common Endowment Fund, to support congregations working to dismantle white supremacy culture, to engage conflicts that relate to dismantling white supremacy culture, and to support BIPOC Leaders and Members of our congregations to fully participate in the leadership of our UUA.



And, I want to close this report with a special shout-out to one member of the MidAmerica Staff, our Regional Finance and Administration Manager Andrew Zallar. As the MidAmerica Board and I have been working to develop a set of Governance Policies for the MidAmerica Region, Andrew and I have also been working to shift the Region’s financial management systems. Beginning in July of 2021, all of the bookkeeping for the MidAmerica Region was brought in-house, in a transition that was not only very successful, but also brought about a savings to the Region of over \$10,000 per year. This has also allowed Andrew and I to simplify and streamline the Region’s financial management, with the oversight and approval of our auditing firm. This has meant many meetings, conversations, emails, and spreadsheets between Andrew and I over the last year, which we are now in the process of developing into a written financial management operational policy for the Region. I would like to thank Andrew for his hard work, his patience, and his dedication through these shifts and changes.

The coming year will be a new journey for the MidAmerica Staff, with the return to travel by the UUA on February 1<sup>st</sup> of this year. However, for reasons of safety, economy, and environment, we have instituted a new

policy that all travel by the MidAmerica Staff must be approved by the Regional Lead... so me. We have put this new policy in place to encourage our staff and our congregations to think through how being in-person will serve the mission of the UUA and the needs of our congregations, and also to think through how we can do that travel sustainably and safely. Because COVID is not going away, we are just having to learn how to live in the new reality created by this pandemic. When I am approving a member of the MidAmerica Staff or an Adjunct Consultant for the MidAmerica Region to travel to be in-person with a congregation, I will be asking them what work has already been done digitally, how being in-person will be able to advance the work of our faith, and what safety practices and procedures we can put in place to travel in ways safer for ourselves and the environment. Our hope is that we are able to be with congregations when that helps them to live their mission, and still lower the impact on the environment and our staff that comes from the travel that is a part of our work.



I am grateful every day for the ways our congregations bring our saving message of liberal and progressive faith into the world and honored that we of the MidAmerica Regional Staff can journey with congregations in building beloved communities to build a more just world. Thank you for your commitment to our congregations, communities, and our world.

Yours in faith,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rev. David Pyle".

Rev. David Pyle  
Congregational Life Consultant and Regional Lead  
MidAmerica Region of the UUA