

GA 2022: UUA President Report on behalf of UUA Staff

Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, President
June 1, 2022

Preface

As fiscal year 2022 comes to a close and I reflect back on this year, I can honestly say I have never experienced anything like this extended period of uncertainty, anxiety, loss and heartbreak. I know how exhausted so many of you are. I am with you. There has been an emotional toll to the difficult decisions and quick changes in response to the pandemic that we have been making for more than two years. There has been an emotional toll of the grief and loss we've experienced personally, nationally and across our communities. There is an emotional toll among our leaders who have been called to respond and lead and offer ongoing pastoral care in the wake of devastating tragedies and mass shootings and war. We have been on high alert on so many levels for years now – trying to protect ourselves, our families and communities, trying to save lives from health, economic, climate and racist, ableist, transphobic, xenophobic assaults, and political calamity.

And the impact has not been the same on everyone. I extend enormous care and prayers especially to Black Unitarian Universalists and to UU's of color. We have lost a significant number of UU leaders of color over the last two years, many far too young. This has had a tremendous impact on our BIPOC UU community. This alongside the racially and identity targeted politics and violence of our country brings compounding traumas and grief.

I also know there is so much heartbreak in our world and in our lives these days. I send you all grace and care, and I pray for all of us to feel the deep compassion and loving kindness that is present to us and a part of each of us.

We are living in a liminal time, a time in-between what has been and what is not yet. We are in the churn of change, of systems that we have relied on breaking down while what is needed is being imagined but not yet clear. In times of change, it is necessary to lean more deeply into mission and what is essential, to lean more deeply into care and relationship and your own spiritual and emotional care. Let go of what you cannot control. Let go of what isn't feeding you or the community. Let go of perfection and holding on to what served the past. Lean into and lean on each other. We need one another. This is no time to go it alone.



In the midst of the challenges, there is also so much vitality in our ministry and movement today. I feel it in the work of justice. I feel it in the innovative practices our people are creating. At the UUA, there is life-giving energy in shifting the way things have always been done, in working with a diverse team of exceptional leaders, working to break down barriers of exclusion and putting care, compassion, inclusion, justice and a commitment to thriving at the center of our work. I feel uncertainty but also exciting possibilities in trying to imagine forward - not going back to an old normal that wasn't serving life and humanity well.

Highlights from our work at the UUA

At the UUA, our mission is to **equip congregations** for vital ministry, to **train and support leaders** both lay and professional, and to **advance our UU values** in the world. These three mission areas continue to guide the work of the UUA, especially during these unpredictable times.

I am incredibly proud of our work these past several years, and I hope that this report brings you pride in all that we have accomplished together.

For the last year for my Presidency, I have identified four priority areas:

- I. Ongoing support to congregations and leaders in navigating the pandemic and post-pandemic realities
- II. Continuing to build on the success of UU the Vote to strengthen our justice ministry and help provide national leadership to organize on behalf of our core values.
- III. Continue the work to implement the recommendations of the Commission on Institutional Change (COIC)
- IV. Support a smooth transition for the presidential election and new incoming President.

Here is additional information about our work in each of these areas:

I. Ongoing Pandemic Response

Early in the pandemic the UUA responded quickly, issuing guidance and recommendations that saved countless lives. When there was not reliable public information or clear guidance, it was important that the UUA helped congregations to make decisions to protect their community and reduce the spread of the virus. It also helped alleviate conflict over how to respond to the pandemic. In the [multi-faith FACT](#)



[\(Faith Communities Today\) study](#), our congregations showed far less conflict over pandemic measures than other faith communities.

Now as we enter this next stage of this pandemic, the UUA is moving from a place of direct guidance to strategies for gathering. Many of our congregations have their own policies that take into account the local situation and variables specific to each congregation in ways that the UUA cannot for every congregation. The UUA will continue to provide [strategies for gathering](#) and cultivate resources in our [Pandemic Resource Library](#) in order to help congregations nurture multiplatform ministries and make in-person gatherings and events safer.

We hope you will continue to be in conversation with your Regional Staff with any questions or concerns you have as we all navigate this pandemic together, centering the needs of the most vulnerable among us and our wider communities.

II. Justice Organizing - Side With Love

[UU the Vote 2022](#) launched on April 10th! I want to invite all of you to participate and connect to UU the Vote 2022. UU the Vote 2022 will build upon the success of UU the Vote 2020, equipping UUs everywhere to build power and organize communities to defend the attacks against our rights and dignity.

We have an important voice as a faith community committed to democracy in the midst of the ongoing onslaught of attacks: the drive to authoritarianism witnessed in the state laws to suppress the vote and allow politicians to overturn elections; the censoring of books and history in our schools; the roll back of reproductive rights; the onslaught of laws targeting the LGBTQ community and our trans children and youth; and the persistent policy failures to support the dignity and thriving of disabled people and people living in poverty. We need religious communities to organize resistance to this onslaught.

At the UUA, we are investing more in our ability to organize and build power around our four intersectional justice priorities: climate justice; decriminalization, which is inclusive of mass incarceration and the criminalization of immigration; democracy and electoral justice; and LGBTQIA+ and gender equity.

We are also making Side With Love the umbrella under which we do all of our justice work. We have launched the [Side with Love Action Center](#) as a one-stop-shop which brings together work around our intersectional justice priorities and allows UUs across the Association



to connect quickly for action for all of our campaigns - UU the Vote, Love Resists, Create Climate Justice, and more!

This is no time for a casual faith or a casual commitment to our values. I hope you find opportunities to deepen your partnership with local organizations and the UUA as we work together to build the world we long to live in.

III. Implement Widening the Circle of Concern Recommendations

The Commission on Institutional Change's (COIC) report, [Widening the Circle of Concern](#), has and will continue to guide the UUA's work this following year.

We are also thinking about how we measure our impact. Tracking the implementation of the report's recommendations requires tremendous coordination across every department at the UUA. The UUA's cross-staff Commission on Institutional Change Implementation Mission Association Team (CIMAT) continues to facilitate the coordination and tracking of our implementation and identifies areas where we need more investment. Additionally, we have a sub-team that is identifying long term indicators that can help measure progress and identify challenges, particularly as it relates to the well-being of our BIPOC UU religious professionals and the development of our congregations as communities of equity and inclusion.

Below are some of the key areas of COIC implementation that we are working on this year:

Governance

The UUA Board has been diligently working on updating our bylaws and plans to bring a business resolution before the delegates at this 2022 General Assembly. Our bylaws are outdated. They draw resources towards a structure that does not serve us well and are reliant on a model of volunteerism that does not reflect current reality. We have an opportunity through these proposed changes to unlock capacity and restructure our organization in a way that will make us more effective, mission-focused and more reflective of our covenantal faith.

The UUA Board is also working on the creation of an accountability structure and process called for in the Commission on Institutional Change's report. The Board is pulling together a team that will help develop this process with the charge to help us be steadfast in our



commitment to growing as an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural faith that embodies practices of the beloved community.

Congregational Accountability

We recognize that the conflicted ending of a ministry has impacts on the entire system – the minister as well as the congregation and its leaders. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee and the UUA have procedures in place to help ordained ministers reflect upon and learn from conflicted endings. We believe this better prepares them for their next and ongoing ministry.

We have now put procedures in place to help a congregation do the same, to reflect upon and learn from difficult endings or transitions.

The Congregational Life staff will work closely with congregations that have a troubled ending with a minister to examine how the actions of congregational leaders and the culture of the congregation affected conflict and contributed towards the difficult ending of the ministry. This process will better equip congregational leaders to have clarity around the kind of ministry that can benefit the congregation going forward.

This is also an opportunity to further strengthen Congregational Life staff relationships with congregations and embody our theological commitment to be lifelong learners - as individuals and communities.

Hope for Us: Conflict Transformation Team

The UUA is also investing more deeply in addressing conflict in congregations through the conflict transformation team, Hope for Us, named in honor of the late Rev. Dr. Hope Johnson, whose vision inspired this group's creation. The team helps congregations and their leaders engage conflict productively with opportunities for positive transformation.

This team has hired nine adjunct coaches from a variety of backgrounds, including lay leaders, religious educators and ministers. In addition, they have already consulted with 23 congregations during this year. Referrals to this team come from Congregational Life staff.

Strategic Communications

At the UUA, we are also thinking more strategically about our communication. You may have noticed that the UU World that arrives in your mailbox comes twice a year now, and I hope that as you read



it, you have noticed the redesign of the magazine, the greater attention to visual storytelling and the focused, in-depth analysis of themes and topics that are aligned with our vision, mission and priorities. We are also producing more digital content available online at uuworld.org/.

At both UU World and our publishing department, Skinner House Books, we have established Advisory teams made up of both UUs and non-UUs with diverse identities to provide a lens of equity, diversity and inclusion at every stage of production.

Leadership Development

Training Leaders is one of our key mission areas, and at the UUA we have been reorienting our Leadership Development offerings with focus on equity, inclusion and belonging; liberating theology; and the practice of covenant.

Leaders, both lay and professional, can engage in learning opportunities through [LeaderLab](#), which features resources on a variety of topics central to congregational life, and the [UU Institute](#), which is an online opportunity for UUs to gather in learning communities for leadership development.

In October we launched Taproot: A National BIPOC space, modeled upon gatherings for BIPOC leaders that were happening in the Central East Region and now are available nationally to any BIPOC leader – lay or professional. It is a monthly gathering for BIPOC leaders to connect in a community of care and counsel.

To learn more about these and other leadership development events, go to <https://www.uua.org/leaderlab/events>.

Mosaic Platform

The Commission on Institutional Change report called for more comprehensive and streamlined resources to support congregations and leaders leading anti-racism work. At the UUA, we have begun creating a *Mosaic* platform, named and modeled after the successful program with the same name that brought together congregations that were intentionally working on building multi-racial, multicultural congregations.

The Mosaic platform will be a collection of multigenerational, age-appropriate resources for anti-racism and anti-oppressive learning in congregations and fostering new practices in community life rooted in



the goals of equity and liberation. This platform will also help UUA staff and others define and measure our work, building from the history of Mosaic Conferences, the work of Mosaic Maker congregations and their evolution.

Children, Youth and Family Ministry

Coming out of the pandemic, we are in a time that is calling us to double-down, reimage and recommit to children, youth and family ministry. The pandemic, among other challenges, has been especially difficult on parent, children and families. We have a mental health crisis among our children. Children, youth and families need support and care and love now more than ever. And this includes our leaders and professionals who are also parents and caregivers! Our Association-wide numbers show a marked decrease in the participation of children in our congregations as a whole. And while there are congregations who have found new life in their religious education programs in the pandemic, we need a stronger investment in religious education and in our religious educators.

Our religious education ministries need support to lead the way in building inclusive communities of belonging for children of every identity, race, ability and disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, neurodiversity and economic background. Because it is in religious education that we so often remember that real change - deeply transformative change - begins in small ways, with relationships of care, attention and learning.

Our congregations have been and are life-saving communities for children and families and it matters that we invest more in this ministry at a time when families need more care and support. This is one of the ways we lean into mission and understand our larger calling in our communities. This is why at the UUA, we are increasing our investments in Children and Family ministry next year and understand that we can support congregations and religious educators in navigating this area.

There is generative work happening in this area informed by shifts to family ministry and the need to broaden equity and inclusion with respect to race, gender identity, neurodiversity and disability. I am excited about the planning happening at the UUA for an Association-wide conversation on religious education inspired by the Essex conversations 20 years ago. This is a place where all have an opportunity to lean into emergent practices.



Additionally, the UUA's Lifespan Faith Engagement office in cooperation with Congregational Life youth and young adult staff are launching a comprehensive redesign to align our staffing for youth and emergent adult ministries. This comes from intentional collaborative conversations with youth, emergent adults, staff and religious educators and is responding to the calls for greater impact and investment in youth and emergent adult ministry. The goal of this alignment is to create a comprehensive youth ministry structure for our Association, create more support on a local and congregational level and create interconnected networks of support and safety.

Professional Credentialing

It is no secret that answering the call to ministry is expensive. This expense is a barrier for many who feel the call to ministry but simply cannot afford the high costs and commitment required to complete the formation process as it currently exists.

At the UUA, we are helping reduce those barriers by increasing resources for scholarship and theological education, especially for BIPOC, disabled, trans/non-binary and low-income people pursuing theological education and religious professional credentialing. We are also increasing the resources we offer our UU identity theological schools, Meadville Lombard Theological School and Starr King School for the Ministry, through the Panel on Theological Education and the Theological Education Endowment Trust.

Beyond scholarship and resources, there is also work happening to address the structures that negatively impact our religious professionals in formation. This includes the work of the Religious Education Credentialing Committee to review their reading lists and provide more opportunity for review and feedback from those who have gone through the process. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee is initiating work to Widen the Pathway to Ministry initiative, an effort to lower the barriers to credentialed ministry and to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. In partnership with the seminaries, we imagine a new approach to formation is possible – one that begins with the individual where they are at. This includes updating the approach to the “reading list” and other requirements as well as re-exploring how preliminary fellowship is assessed.



IV. Presidential Transition

I am entering my final year as your UUA President. The Presidential Search Committee is currently receiving applications for candidates to be considered as a nominee for UUA President with applications due by July 15. You can learn more about the [job description and the application process](#) on uua.org.

The Presidential Search Committee will make their nominations by November 15, and the election will take place in June of 2023 culminating at General Assembly 2023

UU World and the UUA Communications Team will be doing their part to inform people about the election process, the nominees, and much more as we enter this election year.

And, Executive Vice President, Carey McDonald and I will be doing our part to ensure a smooth transition for the incoming President.

Conclusion

The UUA is the embodiment of the covenant that our congregations make to each other. Your faithful support ensures that the UUA is able to equip congregations, train leaders both lay and professional, and advance our UU values in the world. None of this could happen without your support.

The single largest source of unrestricted income to the UUA for our core mission work comes from congregations through the Annual Program Fund. The generosity of our congregations creates direct impact in our congregations across the Association. Your gifts will ensure that support is present for congregations you will never visit, and that resources like Our Whole Lives: Comprehensive Sexuality curriculum is supporting the self-esteem and development of youth you'll never meet. It is one of the ways we extend our ministry and care to each other, not as isolated congregations, but as one larger religious community.

In this time of pandemic, which has been so filled with uncertainty, we have witnessed congregations increasing their giving to the UUA, increasing their generosity in support of the covenant that holds us all. We've seen this same increased generosity about our individual donors through [Friends of the UUA](#). Thank you!



These are extraordinary times. And I know that our faith as Unitarian Universalists matters. Not just to us who are a part of it and our congregations. It matters to our larger communities. Your support of your local congregations and of the UUA is one of the most significant ways that you help impact not only our faith but the things that are possible in our community and the wider world as we advocate for our values - human rights, human dignity, love and justice.

I am honored to continue to serve as UUA President. I am grateful for all of you and the tremendous UUA staff who make all of this work possible. And I look forward to being with you at General Assembly.

Yours in faith and love,



Susan Frederick-Gray
President, Unitarian Universalist Association

