

Annual Report from the Minister

for the Unitarian Universalists of Southern Delaware

by Rev. Heather Rion Starr, written in early May 2025

Around a decade ago, a senior colleague shared with Cathy and me a story from his own life. He and his wife and their two daughters had houseguests coming to stay with them. When the guests arrived, his younger daughter showed them around their home, showing them the primary bedroom and saying “Mommy sleeps here.” And then she said—with the gut-punch honest clarity of a 6-year-old—“Daddy lives at church.” Ouch! It was a powerful, eye-opening story for him, and as our senior colleague, he was sharing it with us as a cautionary tale. Now, as Cathy-and-my’s kids wrap up 2nd and 7th grades, I think of it often, especially when I’m torn between attending something at UUSD, staying late to catch up on work, or coming home, or when I’m deciding between squirreling myself away to work at home or go spend time giving our kids my full attention. I love UUSD and I love serving as your Minister, and...our older kid could well leave home in as soon as 5 years. I don’t want to look back and feel like I missed out on their childhoods any more than I have to.

So goes the juggling act of parenting and working, but especially as UUSD continues to grow, I am having to continually examine and revisit my priorities. I have made a special Filter in Breeze for “Our Congregation,” which includes Members, Friends, and Children & Youth; today that number stands at 434. And that doesn’t include Staff or Visitors, many of whom make a connection with the Minister in their first visit(s) to the congregation, as they consider whether or not to return. And I am still the only full-time staff person here. (If you travel around at all this summer, visit other UU congregations on your travels, and note what their staff configuration is! It’s useful for all of us to learn from our siblings in faith.) My primary areas of focus at UUSD have been **worship preparation & leadership, pastoral care & membership, staff support, and supporting congregational maturation** (such as working with our Office Administrator on how to continue to build on our use of Breeze, or creating with the Executive Team a more formal Rental process and support system for rentals). And, I recognize I have got to work on saying “no” to more additional projects, and continually discerning when my involvement is really necessary with a particular issue, and when it’s not. I am working on this!

Simultaneously, there is more-and-more that happens around here independently of my involvement, and this is a wonderful thing—especially when there is still good communication about what’s going on. The Worship Committee and I continue to work well together and look ahead at Sundays when I will not be leading the service; we continue to identify new voices to invite in as guest speakers while also being committed to incorporating treasured lay-led services led by UUSD Members. I can look back through our Worship Committee shared documents (thanks to Google Workspace) and also scroll through the service recordings on our “Past Services” webpage—and quickly be reminded of many services that we have put our whole hearts and energy into. I encourage *you* to put on a Past Service that you may have missed and let me or the Worship Committee know what you have particularly appreciated!

Administratively and on our Staff Team, Sandy Scheet-Robitaille does so much to keep UUSD running smoothly on a day-to-day basis, and I will miss her greatly when she retires at the end of July. As of October 2025, Julie Keefer will have been working as UUSD's Director of Music Ministry for 7 years; hurrah & enormous thanks to Julie for all the time and heart she puts into UUSD's Music Program. Dr. Heather Hamilton in her role as our Children's Faith Exploration Director has really rallied this year as our CFE program continues to grow, and there is now some CFE programming *every* Sunday, all-year-round. She needs your volunteer support though to keep this happening—please speak with her or reach out to her if you aren't already in touch about how you can help! We need everyone! (Please take the time to read the annual written reports from these core program staff.)

It is wonderful to be able to rely upon Audio-Visual Specialists Cheryl Hickey and Brian Tootle to run the tech for our services and Cheryl has been a marvelous link to our ongoing partnership with the Cinema Art Theater as well. I continue to appreciate all that our contract-Bookkeeper, Leah Thompson, has been doing for UUSD for the past now-ten years. Transitional Facilities Pointperson Cheri Garnet continues to bring essential clarity to the ever-increasing activity at UUSD—thank you for all the good energy you each bring to this community, all of you!

I strive to meet regularly with Office Administrator Sandy Scheet-Robitaille, Director of Music Ministries Julie Keefer, CFE Director Heather Hamilton, and Transitional Facilities Pointperson Cheri Garnet. In a typical month, I attend the bi-monthly Board meetings, Executive Team meetings (typically 2 mornings/month), monthly meetings of the Social & Environmental Justice Committee, Finance Committee, Adult Faith Exploration Committee, Worship Committee, Membership Committee, the Pastoral Care Associates, the Committee on Congregational Life (CCL), and Children's Faith Exploration Committee, Covenant & Affinity Group Council, Pledge Team, and Church Council meetings as they occur. I also try to at least be aware of current topics that Property Management, Safer Congregation Committee, Communications, and Leadership Development Committee leaders are working on; those are Committee meetings that I do not attend. UUSD has 2 Member Representatives to the Lewes-Rehoboth Association of Congregations (L-RAC)—my thanks to our UUSD'rs who maintain that relationship. Additionally, in the Pastoral Care vein, I strive to make time for meetings with individuals and couples regarding preparing memorial services and weddings, and get-to-know-each-other-individually conversations with members, newercomers, people going through difficult or challenging times in their lives, and those considering UUSD membership.

Connecting with colleagues is crucial for sustaining this work, and I also find it energizing and see it as part of my responsibility to represent UUSD locally & regionally. I attend the Priestley-Kingsbury UU Ministers Association Chapter January Gathering at Pendle Hill outside Philadelphia; I also meet monthly with a long-time, small Online UU Clergy Cluster. I have been serving as Secretary on the Starr King School for the Ministry's Graduate Association Executive Team. I am the Mentor for a colleague in Preliminary Fellowship and meet monthly with them. I also regularly attend a weekly offering from one of my UU parish minister colleagues, "lectio divina," in which we spend a half hour (online) studying, experiencing, reading aloud, and sharing about a single poem in-depth with one another—occasionally these are poems you then hear on Sunday morning. This congregational year I have been especially nourished and informed by the year-long, in-depth,

mid-career Coaching program for Clergy incorporating learnings from Family Systems Theory as they can be applied to Congregational Systems—the program is called [Leading with Depth](#). It has been rich and helpful to me in my ministry and as this congregation experiences the natural tensions that come with growth. I continue to try to take Mondays off and to limit evening meetings whenever possible so that I might be present with my family. Thank you for your support and understanding when I do take some time to “check out” and get reenergized, now-and-then.

I have been involved with Housing-related issues locally, as most of us know that Affordable Housing is such a critical issue here in Sussex County. I attend the monthly meetings of the [Sussex Housing Group](#), their Marketing & Membership Subcommittee, and was honored to be the Keynote Speaker at the Family Promise Southern DE Annual Brunch in early May, held at the Village Improvement Association in Rehoboth. I participate in the annual overnight Point-in-Time Homeless Count in Sussex County (and simultaneously throughout the state) in January. In January 2025 I completed my service on the Town of Milton’s Ad-Hoc Affordable/Workforce Housing Committee. All of these activities also lift up UUSD’s visibility in our area and convey our commitment to “embrace diversity, work for justice and strive for a loving world.”

CFE Director Heather Hamilton and I worked hard to plan for and execute the 25-session Our Whole Lives (OWL) sexuality education curriculum offered to 7th-to-9th graders this congregational year. We had a full cadre of trained adult Leader-Volunteers—thank you so much to each of you—Juan, Susan H., Don, Susan G.—and to all the parents and caregivers who got our Youth there to all those sessions (and brought snacks)! I am so grateful to everyone involved in making it possible for us offer this important program to middle-schoolers and their families in Sussex County.

I will be taking Sabbatical (as agreed upon in my Letter of Agreement with UUSD) during the months of October 2025, May-July 2026, and January-February 2027. There will be a Sabbatical Coverage Team which can take questions and handle any issues that arise during my absence. Of course I plan to read All the Books and All the Articles and Listen to All the Podcasts during that time—but in all seriousness, I *am* truly looking forward to the chance to breathe more deeply, step away from e-mail, and be reminded that all the good work of UUSD can really function just fine without me for a time. This is a strong and healthy congregation, and I will come back from those sabbatical periods more grounded, restored, and with a replenished well of ideas, thoughts, and experiences to share.

It continues to be a joy to co-create Unitarian Universalist community in Southern Delaware with you, and I thank you all for your dedication, generosity, warmth, invitation into your homes and lives, and your continued engagement with and support of this ever-evolving community. Thanks to all those who have served on the Board of Trustees these year, to our dedicated staff both salaried and contract, to all of you who serve on Committees, who lead Covenant or Affinity Groups, who volunteer, who contribute your time, talent, and/or treasure in any and all of the ways that you do. May we together embrace the challenges and joys of what comes next.