

Unitarian Church of Baton Rouge Annual Report 2022-2023

Delivered to the congregation on April 24, 2023

Introduction

This annual report from Rev. Nathan Ryan, your Ministry Team Leader (MTL), is not necessarily the annual report of your Senior Minister or the congregation. It is the report on how we implemented your board's *Annual Vision of Ministry (AVOM)*. Issues about the AVOM are board questions. Implementation issues are minister and staff questions.

A quick reminder that the church is structured as follows: The congregation, at the top, elects a board. That board sets goals and limits. Think of it like a Roomba. You set the goal: clean the living room. You set the limits: those beacons that prevent it from leaving the room. You don't physically move the vacuum around to clean the floor. You set it loose and trust it to clean. If it messes up, you set new limits.

That is how this church operates under Policy Based Governance. The board sets policies. Then the board creates the AVOM. The AVOM usually sets three broad goals yearly at its summer board retreat. Then it asks the Ministry Team Leader, one of the roles your called Senior Minister takes on, to implement that vision. The board holds the ministry team leader accountable to that *Annual Vision of Ministry*.

The church is structured to ensure accountability. The board's job is to listen to you and discern your vision for the church. Then they synthesize what they hear and craft the AVOM.

The board asks the MTL to implement the AVOM. The MTL has complete discretion to implement it however he sees fit — as long as he doesn't go outside the limits or the policies. That could mean doing it all himself, or it could mean delegating some or all of it to paid and volunteer staff.

The governance of the church – caretaking of the *institution* of the church - all falls under the board and the committees like finance and personnel committees. The ministry of the church – implementation of the AVOM – falls under the Ministry Team Leader, staff, task forces and teams.

Here is what we did to implement your vision.

Annual Vision of Ministry

Continue our deep commitment to racial reconciliation and work towards full implementation of the 8th principle.

Last program year we adopted the 8th principle that states “We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”

In other words, we as a congregation agree that the covenant that holds us together (our principles) includes examining the things within ourselves and our institutions – this church, your work, our families – that get in the way of creating the beloved community.

Your board was very concerned when we adopted the 8th principle that it not just sit there as a mark of pride with no substance behind it. Instead, they wanted to make sure it was something we are absolutely dedicated to. Included in the vision of our ministry is *the end of systemic oppressions in ourselves and our institutions*. Some of the things we have done to help get us towards Beloved Community (with the most complicated ones at the end) are:

We installed a hearing loop so that anyone with appropriate hearing aids could automatically tune in to the worship sound system. We offered a program called Songs on Being Human, put on by a social worker, Kevin Credeur, intending to help participants connect with their own emotions and cultivate empathy as it relates to racial reconciliation.

We marked the thirtieth anniversary of Yoshi Hattori's killing. The Japanese Media attended, although no one from our newspaper or tv stations did.

We began a conversation about how to spread the energy and excitement of this year's Gospel Service throughout the choir without the false dichotomy of white choir and black choir, or regular choir, and gospel choir. Rather we began discussions of how to best maximize the talents and skills in this church to create the best aesthetic worship experiences for everyone.

Reverend Brock Leach invited some key leaders to participate in his doctoral work “A Beloved Community Competency Evaluation.” After his assessment, Rev. Leach said that we are right on track to do the work of creating Beloved Community.

We have continued our Anti-Oppression Study Group. We also offered *Our Whole Lives* sexuality education curriculum: to fourth - fifth graders and to ninth - tenth graders in 2022. This year we offered it to kindergarten - first graders and seventh - eighth graders. Almost half of the participants were families who were not members of the church.

In January, Rev. Chris, Director of Family Ministry Kathy Smith, and I all preached on the Article II Commission's proposed changes to the eight principles. These proposed changes are years away, but they are clearly focused on how we, as Unitarian Universalists live out our faith.

We intentionally shifted the focus of the Social Justice Team. Currently the goal of the social justice team is to offer a transformative experience for anyone who joins. Thus, our vision is: anyone who wants to become a *Social Justice minded Unitarian Universalist* May participate in the social justice team meetings, regardless of knowledge or skills, and embark on a transformative path towards social justice.

The last two accomplishments toward the first point of our AVOM most clearly impact our implementation of the 8th principle, and in no way impact it. Here is what I mean.

First, we brought in Michael Dowd to help theologically guide us through the changes that we expect will happen here in Baton Rouge with climate change. I want to be clear that this is not necessarily ending systemic oppressions in ourselves or our institutions. It is, however, giving us the tools we will need to deal with adversity.

It is my experience that if you've done your work to understand racism and systems before a trauma happens, you will be less prone to respond to the trauma in ways that perpetuate systemic oppressions. To say that another way: giving you, us, the tools to cope with future weather traumas will help prevent our furthering racism and other oppressions in ourselves and others.

The other thing we did that absolutely belongs here and absolutely does not belong here is we hired and installed a Minister of Congregational Life. Here is what I mean about how this does and does not belong as a fulfillment of this AVOM.

Rev. Chris Long was hired because he was the best fit and most qualified candidate for our position. He was not hired because he is Black, 1/8 Chinese, or gay. However, and this is true with any minister we would have hired, allowing in the fullness of the minister, just as we should allow in the fullness of every visitor and member, requires us to do the deep spiritual work of understanding and dismantling oppressions within ourselves and our institutions so we can start building Beloved Community.

And what does this mean for our AVOM? It means that Rev. Chris's presence along with his identities implies that the work we as a congregation should have been doing anyway – work that we have been doing – is all the more important.

Grow our understanding for shared ministry to strengthen our beloved community through better communication and developing a membership plan.

To start, let's focus on the part of this AVOM that specifically says *strengthen*. Let's talk about what the safe church and congregation team is doing. Under the guidance of Melanie Mayeux, the team received a \$35,000 safety grant from the Department of Homeland Security. This grant can be used only for physical building safety upgrades. It is being used to rekey the church's outside doors, and to add a new keypad and key fob system to allow us to better control who does and does not have access to the building.

The team has spent years studying safety and the congregation. They will begin presenting a lot of their work to you this summer. Among the biggest risks to congregational safety are the facts that 1) many of the doors don't get locked and latched and 2) we have lost count of how many keys are out among former renters and church members. Having doors that shut and lock and a way to control who comes in and out of the church will dramatically impact the Monday to Saturday safety.

While the probability is low, the possibility of a hostile intruder causes great fear. The team has researched and considered ways to prevent or minimize this possibility. Homeland Security advised the team that moving the welcomers closer to the parking lot to greet people as they arrive is one of the most important safety measures we can implement. The membership team has followed this advice.

We emphasize, however, that of the many risks to the safety of this congregation, the chance of hostile intruders is very low. It is, however, the one that takes the most attention. The safety team will continue addressing the risks in the weeks and months ahead.

We've addressed other aspects of the shared ministry component of the AVOM. A couple of years ago we upgraded our church database and information management system. We are working to provide leaders with access to its basic capabilities, and then to open appropriate modules to all members. Training of leaders is scheduled throughout the summer of 2023. As staff resources permit, basic training for all members and advanced training for leaders will follow. In most churches, to maximize their database, they hire a paid database manager. Because we do not have the resources for that, we will have a longer implementation period and will rely on supplemental volunteer help.

The last piece of this AVOM component is membership. Part of our vision for the Minister of Congregational Life is to shepherd the membership of this church. Reverend Chris is well on his way towards this vision, but it will take time. Here is our status:

We are not where we were prior to our ministerial transition and the pandemic. Fortunately, we did not experience a mass exodus of members. In fact, the only pronounced attrition was mainly due to deaths and people moving away. We did not, however, grow at a pace that could replace those losses.

Churches rarely grow during a ministerial transition, and clearly not during the pandemic. We did add members, but not enough to counterbalance the natural attrition that comes from the passage of time.

To grow we need two things. The first is we need a good plan in place. Rev. Chris has put together a membership team headed by Donna Yelverton. They've put together a comprehensive membership plan – the first in my ministry here. It will take time to cultivate and fully implement that plan.

The second thing we need is a church doing great things – we have that – that is ready to make space for guests. I'm not convinced we are there yet as a congregation.

Here is what I mean: After losing so much in the shutdowns and the transitions, for the past year I've seen this congregation asking more often questions about how we can get what we need for ourselves, and less about what guests or the future congregation will need.

Here's an example that is showing me where we are developmentally in our recovery: In the beforetimes people would park across the street to make sure there was room for visitors. I don't see many of us doing that anymore. And I know that usually the sanctuary is only holding 50 to 100 people. But that's not always the case. I'm not saying this to shame. I'm making an observation about where we are developmentally in terms of our recovery.

A long recovery from trauma is not unreasonable. So much of what we used to have has changed. You can't help put on someone else's oxygen mask until you've put on your own first. If you're still trying to get a handle on this church being yours again, it's challenging to make space for new people.

But we are getting closer to that security point. We are getting closer to trusting that we can breathe in the church again.

When we start feeling comfortable with that, when we are ready to make space for visitors, and when we have the infrastructure and the will to truly welcome them, then we will start growing again.

Create a culture that develops and fosters involvement, generosity, and engagement.

We have worked hard on this aspect of our AVOM. To begin shifting the culture in the congregation, here is what we did. First, we emphasized Middle Hour so that more people could engage in the ministries of the church. We launched the year with a connections fair, coordinated by Pennie Nichols. There are plans for another such opportunity for volunteer engagement next board year.

Then, last August we brought in a congregational stewardship consultant, Mark Ewert, to talk with us about what our current status as a congregation is as it relates to generosity. He said that this church was still re-forming, still in the "me" phase, the "I want" phase, and that it would take us some time to shift to a culture of generosity.

Since his visit we established a generosity team. That team is chaired by Capi Landreneau and Donna Yelverton. The team is not just the annual budget drive — it was intentionally broadened. The generosity team's charge is to oversee a cultural shift in the congregation, not just to shore up the finances of the church, but also to make us a spiritually mature giving church.

Think of it this way: if you knew you were about to come into a financial windfall, or if you were struggling with finances, maybe heavily in debt, or trying to figure out how much to save to retire, or if you wanted to make an institutionalized gift to the church, this would be the team you would go to — to secure funds for the church, but even more to ensure that

every member of this church had the capacity to be financially stable and secure regardless of means or circumstances. And even broader, that every member has a spiritually fulfilling relationship with money, regardless of their means or circumstances.

The generosity team is in charge of much more than just the annual budget drive. It includes fundraising, education, planned giving, and analysis. And since generosity is a part of the AVOM, on this annual report, let's talk about the state of the church financially. And it's kind of, mostly, great news.

So here's what you need to know about the church: First, most churches our size rely on pledges to cover 70% of the total budget. They either have an endowment – which we don't really have – or they have significant rental income – which we also don't get.

That means that our budget is about \$200,000 less than most churches of similar size. Also, most UU churches make pledging a requirement for membership. This church has said – over and over – that requiring a pledge is not within the values of the church.

In other words, most churches our size have about 300-350 pledging families. Our church only has about 230 pledging families, but it still provides ministry to 350 or so families. That means that members' pledges supplement the non-pledgers.

This is neither good nor bad. It is a cultural and value statement with ramifications. It means that many who give are already giving at capacity, and until we either grow our membership numbers or grow outside income, we will continue to run a very, very tight budget.

Consequently, our 2023 budget required a lot of cuts. We had to cut the programming in half and reduce our UUA gift for the first time in a long time. Ironically, these cuts came at a time when many of you dramatically increased your giving.

This news may sound bad, but there is an explanation. For as long as I've been here, the church's budget was supplemented through capital fund drive grants and some little one time tricks to keep the budget going. The last three years we balanced the budget with government grants to protect payroll during the pandemic.

This year's budget is tight, but it is also sustainable. In other words, everything in the budget is accounted for, and easily replicated. There is no one-time money holding up this budget.

And it has two implications within it. First, it means we need to rely heavily on fundraising to balance the budget. I put an absurdly aspirational \$35,000 in fundraising income to balance this budget. I wasn't sure it would happen, but you gave \$30,000 at the auction alone! This tight budget means that we will have to have a lot more of the small fundraising drives like we did to replace the kitchen flooring.

The other thing it means, and this one is significant: The UUA provides guidelines for how your staff should be compensated. Because we couldn't increase salaries this year, your staff, who have worked very very hard during these past few years, all lost money.

The forgone cost of living adjustment this year is 8%. That means there was an 8% reduction in income, along with increased insurance rates; staff are getting hit by this. The upcoming stewardship drive will require us to shore up our staff compensation.

We are addressing this need by having a comprehensive generosity team whose goal is to get all of you to a state of financial comfort and stability in your own life and spirit, and then if everyone in the church gives what they are able to give, we will have more than we know what to do with.

Sabbatical Update

The very last thing is that after almost eleven years of ministry, I will finally take a full sabbatical. The dates are May 8 - September 8. We have a plan to supplement Rev. Chris's ministry. Reverend Sara Green (a UU community minister based in New Orleans who has affiliated with our congregation) has agreed to help supplement some of the preaching. Our former intern Leslie Runnels has agreed to be our supplemental sabbatical support minister. Some of the preaching will be provided by a group of members of the church who have completed a preaching class that Rev. Chris and I taught.

A minister is supposed to take a sabbatical every four to seven years. My time for sabbatical showed up right during all of the ministerial transitions, and it just wasn't a great time to do it. But it is time.

I am nervous about leaving, but not because of a lack of trust in the staff and leaders. In fact, the healthy state of staff and leadership in this church, especially as it relates to recovery, is why I am so confident about leaving. Instead, I am nervous to leave because I have been pushing the train so hard to keep this church going that it feels weird to let go (although I know it'll still keep going).

But you cannot have another senior minister who is pushing all of the things to keep it going. And the pace by which the staff and I ran during the pandemic is not sustainable. So I am going away so that I can get grounded, to set myself up for the next six to eight years of ministry with you.

So while I am gone, everything will move forward. The mantra is tweaks, but no changes while Rev. Chris is in charge.

I could not be more confident in his abilities and leadership. This church is poised to do some amazing things, and I am excited to find out what a realigned ministry will look like with you when I return.