

## 2025-2026 Annual Report

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Presented at April 12, 2026 Congregational Meeting

By Rev. Nathan Ryan, Senior Minister

This year's annual report centers around a contradiction: congregation transitioning, struggling and thriving. To some degree that is true every year, but this year feels even more pronounced. The story here is one of a congregation fully engaging in its new chapter.

The metaphor that comes to mind is a garden in mid February in Louisiana. Plants that are done for the winter are still in the ground, but seeds we have sown for the spring are just barely budding. Some people like to clean out browned parts of plants, but they serve a purpose. They provide sanctuary for insects and food for the soil.

I hope you don't think this is a metaphor about getting rid of the old ways and bringing in the new. It isn't. Many plants damaged by a freeze are still growing under the soil. The browned leaves provide a level of protection until the plant is ready to come to life again. In the same way this church is figuring out what this season's new growth will look like while keeping the same roots.

In other words, it is possible to describe this church as one that is struggling with identity, in transition, and not what everyone wishes it was. It is also possible to describe this church as on the verge of something remarkable.

Every year the board sets out an annual vision of ministry. They ask for monthly reports on how I, as ministry team leader, not necessarily as senior minister, am planning to help achieve the vision of the board set out. Most annual reports I present each of the three visions of ministry and spent time elaborating each. Because there is so much to cover this year, I will simply review the three, mention what will be placed in each of those categories, and then give you a larger narrative of the church.

### **Annual Vision of Ministry**

1. Provide a spiritual home of safety, stability and hope, and a refuge where we practice radical hospitality.

This is where we will talk about the Strategic Plan, the staff and cultural transitions, and the state of finances.

2. Remove the barriers and oppressions that obstruct engagement, inclusion, and spiritual enrichment.

This includes the parts of Rev. Chris's leaving that no one is mentioning, tensions around how ministry is happening now and the growth of the healthy congregations committee.

3. Equip our congregants with the tools we need for broader spiritual exploration, for engagement in advocacy, and for putting forth a strong example of Unitarian Universalist values in our community.

This includes Queerfete, Mision Migrante Work, the success of the support group Parenting in Tumultuous Times, and more about the strategic plannings

Let me first describe the congregation. Raw membership numbers are not always the best measure of church health. Attendance has slowly risen from an average of 100 when we reopened to an average of 140 now. Since the last congregational meeting we welcomed 35 new members and two former members have been reactivated. Since the COVID shutdowns we have added 156 members. 140 of them are still active in the church. We are still funding the church on only 200 pledging units – those are families that pledge, so it totals about 300-350 people.

This church is in the process of one of the most ambitious strategic plans our consultant has ever heard of. 110 people have engaged in one of the 20 subteams, meeting every Tuesday in Lent to plot out the future of this church. I will talk more about that later.

There were significant challenges last year. We were publicly questioned on facebook about how we determine who is invited into the pulpit. This required a re-articulating of our church's policy on such things. We had a listening session with more than 60 participants about what each others experience of multi-generational worship can be. These tensions were a jump start for the Healthy Congregation Committee needed to get clear on their charge.

We are in another ministerial transition. Reverend Chris Long ended his almost three-year ministry with us. He assured us that his relationship with the congregation was strong, but his struggles were with the city of Baton Rouge. After a nationwide search, one month after his departure, we welcomed Reverend Meredith Barber. While the transition went as well as could be expected, and Rev. Meredith is a great addition to this church, the speedy transition did not leave interim time.

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To say that in another way, there wasn't time to grieve Rev. Chris before getting to know Rev. Meredith. There were significant elements of Rev. Chris's ministry that have been quiet since he left – I don't hear much talking about him or his ministry. I wonder if that's natural or it points to something about this congregation's comfort about race or sexual identity.

Another transition was with our bookkeeping service. Halfway through the year it became apparent we should not renew our contract with our former bookkeeper. There were five missed staff paychecks that required our Congregational Administrator to write paper checks. Retirement contributions were not made on time.

Often financial reports were unreadable or included tens of thousands of dollars in uncategorized expenses. In October we ended our contract and chose a new a bookkeeping company, Belay, which was highly recommended by a number of colleagues. The service provides a bookkeeper, an understudy to the bookkeeper, and a supervisory system that allows a level of accountability we did not have last year.

I want to state this clearly: our treasurer, new bookkeeper, and Finance Committee, see no evidence of theft. What we did see, was months of miscategorized expenses. It took our new bookkeeper until mid-March, working weekly with Allison and our Treasurer, Rob Johnson, to give us accurate financials for 2025.

The numbers tell a few stories about the church. On first glance, I was quite worried. I expect some church members to feel similarly. I felt much less worried after closer inspection combined with multiple conversations with our strategic planning, stewardship and finances consultant, Mark Ewert, numerous colleague calls, and conversations with church leaders.

First, we didn't meet our fundraising goal. For several reasons—including a five-month delay of the auction, personal circumstances among fundraising coordinators, increased costs, and an ambitious target—we fell \$35,000 short of our \$75,000 goal.

Second, building maintenance costs were \$36,000 over budget from the year before. Many of these are one-time repairs including nearly \$5000 for the sanctuary sound system, \$9000 for a water leak, \$2,000 for tree trimming required by insurance, and \$9000 for an air conditioner compressor. While these could have come from the maintenance reserve, I left them in the operating budget for transparency.

There is also an overage in office expenditures – primarily everyday items like memorial service paper and bulletin boards. While more accurate financials

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would have made this easier to avoid, budgeting these line items falls to me and those I supervise.

That is what happened. Here is the counsel I was given, and how I am addressing this going forward: Churches are different than businesses and homes budgets. Because so many people are invested, there is a level of resiliency that is not possible in other settings.

These are projected budgets. In many years, this church has exceeded its budget in some areas while additional income helped cover those gaps.

When the 2025 financials came in, I spent a week in conversation, discernment, and under considerable stress. Our consultant reminded me that situations like this are common in churches, including the UUA after they let go of an underperforming bookkeeper last year, and encouraged me to consider two questions: is the church OK? And did something happen in 2025 that is being addressed in 2026?

Back to that garden, there is evidence of incredible health, but it can be enticing to only look at the browning leaves. Last year three church members left significant legacy gifts. Those gifts initiated a conversation about endowment which we will talk about later in this meeting. Ideally, one-time gifts only go into the endowment. However, none of these gifts had stipulations on them, and some of these had to be used to cover the overages.

We currently have \$429,000 in the bank. So the answer to the first question about the church being OK financially is yes. To answer the second question – what happened in 2025 and is that being addressed in 2026 – the answer is an unequivocal yes. We have addressed it in three ways.

First, we contracted with a bookkeeping company that allows for more transparency and oversight. Second, we outsourced payroll to ADP to prevent the errors experienced last year. Third, I created an Executive Tam who will advise me on matters of ministry including budgets, building oversight and personnel. Cynthia Bryant, Marla Elsea and Vicky Smith have agreed to serve in this capacity.

The majority of this report has been on money because I value transparency. But that focus does not tell the story of the budding new leaves growing from this church's deep root structure. We had another auction, this time held on the traditional time. That auction raised more than \$24,000. We are ready to launch our third annual QueerFete. This LGBTQ+ music festival brings in hundreds to celebrate queerness in a time of incredible erasure.

We are running high school OWL - sexuality education curriculum. Seven of the participants are from the community and not from this church. Through

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our involvement with Together Baton Rouge, we supported their work to educate the city on the complicated Thrive plan. We are now supporting TBR on their effort to educate the community on the new proposed St. George school district.

We saw some of our highest Sunday school attendance the Sunday Kathy and Capi launched the Parenting in Tumultuous Times support group.

The endowment task force is ready to make recommendations on an endowment that is still substantial enough for us to begin utilizing it. Donna Yelverton, a member who heads up the legacy circle, has solicited dozens of church members who have agreed to make a gift to the church from their estate. In other words, the endowment will only strengthen over time thanks to your generosity and her hard work.

In December when the president surged a militarized ice presence in Baton Rouge, this church, through key volunteers, began collaborating with Mission Migrante to offer notary, legal, and food support to those afraid to leave their houses. We were able to have a presence for a community that was being significantly targeted. The church hosted a number of Know Your Rights seminars.

The most significant thing that happened in the last year, and possibly in my entire 14 years of ministry with you, has been this strategic plan. Most strategic plans involve 5 to 10 people. While they solicit feedback from the congregation in cottage meetings, just as we did, it usually ends the congregational involvement there. Instead of the Steering Team presenting the plan, we turned the work back to the congregation.

The steering team identified 20 different sub teams to propose 20 elements of the strategic plan. These include, and please stand if you were on one of these teams: building beloved community, removing barriers for engagement, the outdoor environment, building optimization, infrastructure and accessibility, sanctuary renovations, a plan to eventually expand this building or buy more property if needed, worship, faith formation, social justice,, community outreach, music, financial sustainability, denominational relations, foundational documents and systems, safety, staff and volunteer support, fun and fellowship, communications and technology.

Each of these teams was staffed with a colead consisting of a veteran and a newer member. This allowed for fresh ideas, but it also gave permission for newer members to be leaders in this church. Throughout lent, more than 100 people came to this church every Tuesday to plan for its future. I have never seen this level of engagement or enthusiasm.

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There is so much good work happening with these groups it is nearly impossible to share it all right now. Highlights include grounds that can feed animals, members, and neighbors. Grounds that people can play in. A financially sustainable church. A renovated sanctuary, building, and even parking lot with an eye towards inclusion, intentionality, and welcoming.

It will take the steering team some time to sort through these plans. We are planning to launch a capital drive this fall. Just as we did the last time, our consultant will do a financial feasibility study to recommend what he thinks this church can afford to do.

The plan in the fall is to ask members of this church to make both a generational gift and their regular operating gift. In other words, we will not do two asks, we will streamline the entire financial conversation into one.

Back to that garden metaphor one more time. This church has such a strong root system that we can see the growth popping up all over this church. I am certain that this year, the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the church, will be remembered for generations.